Spectrum
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Spectrum 2006

Literary and Arts Magazine

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Editor-in-Chief: *Heidi Shepler*
Editorial Staff: *Keith Greer*
Ladzer Odotei

Advisor: *Carol Sapora*

Design and Production: *Cari Strunck*
Stacey Strickland
Hattie Hale
Leanne Potter
Devin Emery
Ebony Brown
Amber Hughes

Advisor: *Janna Rice*

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Haiku Life

Jody Johnson

Life is uncertain.
No guarantee, live bravely.
Love with all your heart.

Earth rocks to and fro,
lovers come and go, even
solid rock crumbles.

Age erodes bodies,
Minds weaken, memory fails,
The cold settles in.

Friends leave town, don't call,
Children turn adult and fly.
Home is not the same.

Yet life is lovely,
Scents, sound, spectrums touch us all,
Foods sweet and sour.

Deep sleep refreshes.
Art/music restores the soul.
Learning never stops.

Life is very good.
Loving others is central
to living fully.

My life is just grass.
Here today, gone tomorrow.
May I love deeply.

Cayt Baynard

Patch

Ashley Judy

I can barely recall the day I got Patch. It seems like so long ago, like a dream of a young girl of eight, hopelessly afraid of the dark. Until that point, Patch was just another nameless stuffed animal in a box, with no one to call a friend. To this day, I'm not really sure what kind of animal Patch is supposed to be. A puppy seems to be the closet match, even though she has no tail. Nevertheless, with floppy ears, two bows, and a body full of glow-in-the-dark stars, we were inseparable. I can still remember my father holding her to the light before bed, and through the night her stars lit up just enough to scare off the monsters lurking in the shadow-filled corners. I squeezed her tight and she kept me safe.

Over the years and through countless moves, her body began to show signs of wear. She wasn't quite as firm as she had been, dirt caused her once shiny exterior to dull and fade, and an unfortunate accident left her with only one eye and no nose to speak of. In fact, it wasn't until that very accident that she received a name that stuck: Patch. Using only the tools I had available to me at the time, I set upon the task of creating an eye patch to cover the small hole that remained where the eye had once been. My dog Cody had chewed it into something unrecognizable, and the nose was nowhere to be found. An old pair of shorts with a sturdy, black, elastic waist band was perfect eye-patch material. I carefully cut out a sort of elongated circle shape, with one flat side. Poking holes into the top, I slid through a piece of string and knotted it in the back. Placing my creation onto Patch's head, I realized right away that it wasn't going to stay, so I set out to find glue; there was no glue to be found. Fortunately, I happened upon a bottle of fabric paint, a thick and sticky purple liquid that seemed like a perfect substitute for glue. I emptied almost the entire bottle before the patch would actually stay put. After that, I proceeded to the nose. By then, there was really nothing to work with except the fabric paint, and so I drew on a bluish purple, fabric-paint nose and filled in the hole with what remained in the bottle. Patch was whole once more.

Even at nineteen, I keep my friend close. Patch sleeps with me at night. I hold her under the lamp, just as I did then, and look on in amazement as her stars still shine. Although somewhat dim, I know in my heart that they shine just enough to scare off the monsters that may still be lurking in the shadows.

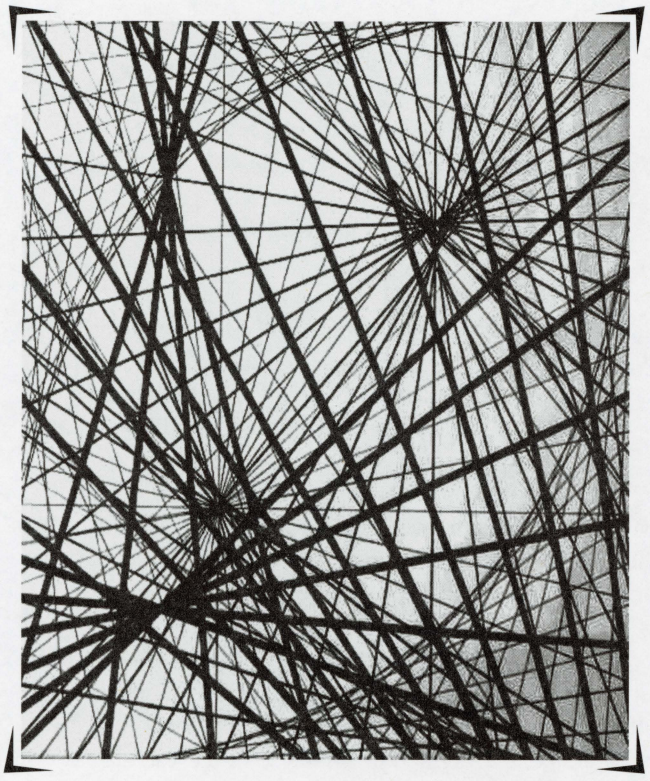
Megan Richardson

good morning berlin

Virginia Petrucci

no warning for this violence of wings.
two boxes, exhausted by an impatience of butterflies,
open for the unforgiving flutter.
a rainbow of blue yawns into an unsuspecting morning:

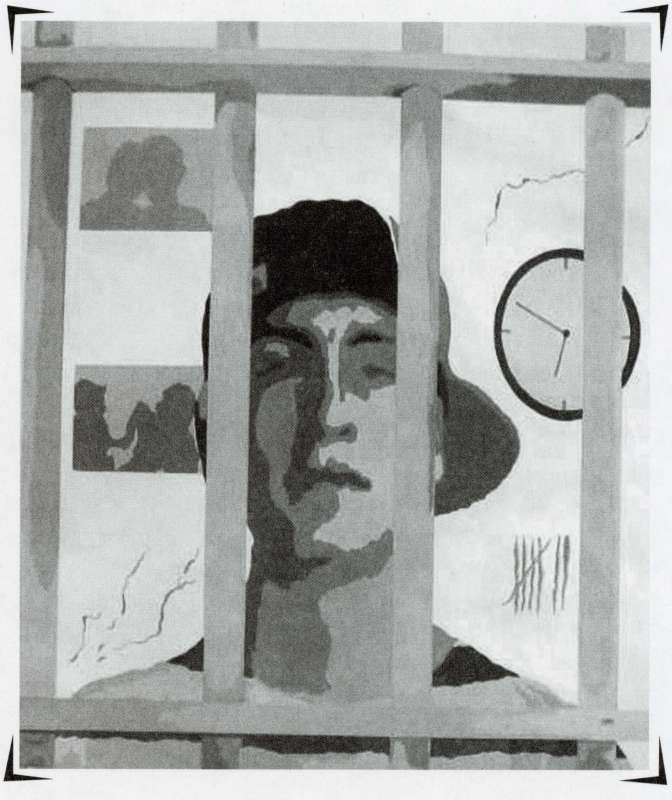
an angel has opened his eyes.



Cari Strunck

Hattie Hale

Taurean Washington



Devin Emery

Lost

Jaimee Wecker

"You could get lost in them, couldn't you?" he says, sitting up beside me.

My gaze pauses on his own, before idly moving back to the vast universe blazing brightly in front of me, the night sky center-stage and domineering.

I feel him slump back down beside me on the blanket and then clumsily grab at my hand. His fingers interlock with my own, and a sense of warmth envelopes me.

* * *

"Let's go star gazing," says Nick, a knowing look on his face.

"Star gazing?" I ask incredulously. I return his "knowing look" and further my query: "This isn't just another excuse to have sex, is it?"

His smile disappears, hurt written all over him. Instantly my heart lurches—for *once* the boy didn't have sex on his mind!

"No, no," he stammers. "Nothing of the sort." He looks crestfallen, and I feel like doing him right then and there to show him how sorry I am to have made such a presumption. Obviously that wouldn't be quite the right way to apologize, so instead I go for the safer, more realistic approach.

"I'm sorry, I was only kidding," I laughingly tease, while the momentary thought flickers into my mind that maybe it was *me* focused on sex, not him.

"I'd love to go," I added, a firm smile fixed across my lips.

His muscles relax, and his face is suddenly free of the tension (and maybe hidden guilt) of a few moments before. I take his hand in mine, and we walk out of M&S into the street.

"By the way," I casually remark, "what all does star gazing entail?"

"Ah! Just a blanket, a big field, and a crisp clear night!" he chirps enthusiastically. "And us," he adds solemnly—or was it suggestively? Immediately I think of the season—autumn, nearing winter. Cold as hell, too.

"Great," I murmur, that fixed smile still on my face.

* * *

So here we are, a week later, his hand warm in my own, and the freezing weather suddenly melts away. There's a tenderness in his grip and before long I'm lost not in the great expanse of the sky, but in the warmth of his love.

He kisses me, softly, sweetly, and I feel all aflutter. My skin glows, my smile practically radiates, and despite my better judgment (or maybe for it), we make love. And it's beautiful, like the night sky, like his soulful eyes.

* * *

Afterwards, as we walk hand in hand back down the hill to our waiting car, I turn to him. "You really could get lost in them," I murmur.

He nods appreciatively, neither of us knowing we both really meant getting lost in one another's eyes.

Private Symphony

Karen Penman

Along with the other 4.5 million Americans, my grandmother is slowly fading from Alzheimer's Disease. True memories of her are as scarce as a wild rose in winter, and true photographs are just as rare. But in one photograph, taken long after the disease had stolen her own words and memories, she remains true.

My aunt and mother, her oldest and youngest, are staring back at me from the picture with weary smiles pasted on their faces, like clouds around the sunTrace amounts of family history weave through the picture, through all of their faces. They lean over her in her wheel-chair, her confinement. Her slight slouch in the wheel-chair rumples her cotton nightgown with the pink daisies on it. Food crumbs and stains mar the nightgown and the cushion that holds her in her wheel chair, but she pays them no mind.

My grandmother is not looking at the camera, and the expression on her face is almost unreadable. Her aging, sagging skin weighs her face down, and the wrinkles cause her face to settle in an almost-frown, but she's neither frowning nor smiling. She stares at something in the air, up above, something no one else sees. And her hands are not resting on the arms of the wheelchair, like I had thought they were. Instead, they are raised just above, with her hands almost curled in fists. She is caught in mid-motion. Her mouth is open in a little *o* and her lips are pursed, the wrinkles in her cheeks gathering together like used tissue paper. Her cheeks are pulled together and despite her skin, her strong cheekbones become visible as her song starts. She spends her days whistling herself away, and the day that the picture was taken, she was captured whistling a waltz-like tune. Her hands that are poised above the wheelchair are actually moving in time to the tune she is whistling, conducting an orchestra only she can see. Her eyes are bright and shiny, happy with something that has nothing to do with the people in the room with her.

the usual questions

Michael Cooney

i saw your silhouette floating effortlessly
with the darkest night clouds,
your edges illuminated by the stars behind you.
you, the angel, were careful to keep in front of them,
forbidding them from painting their light on your face.
you were not concerned with fame,
but instead with the world you were asked to watch,
lit radiantly by the light behind you.

and as you hovered there,
admiring the view of love at work,
questions hovered too —
the usual questions i face
when i encounter angels:
do i have what it takes
to let the light lead me
humbly into the morning?
do i have what it takes to
hide my face and just admire the view?

I never was

Glenn Klug

The place I never was from—
A land of valleys
And rolling hillsides,
Soft peaked mountains, with
Nourishing springs, that
Feed wild fields, of
Red-petal flowers.
I miss the land, and
Yet I never can return.

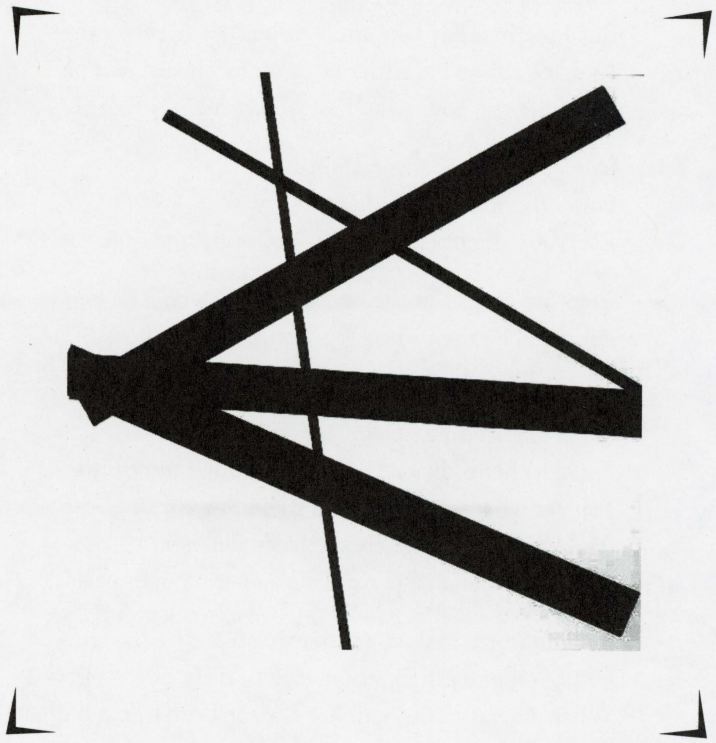
Lucille's

Lindsay Payne

The lights flash,
bright colors all around
blue—red—green—yellow—white.
The floor pulses,
each beat thumps in time
with the lights.

Sweat beads
on my forehead.
Hips fused,
bodies sway—bump—pulse
beat—thump—together in time
with the music.

Blood rises,
bodies mesh closer, closer,
the beat never stops—
neither do I—sway in time
with the crowd.



Cari Strunck

Starving Artist

Bryan Goetz

The rain struck the gutter outside with a melodic dinging, perfectly in time as it continued to pour. The weatherman said it would rain like this for days, and I believed him.

In the room, barley lit save for a single light bulb in an old lamp, the sound of the rain and the gutter created an eerie background for my writing. The rhythm I heard from outside was mimicked by the sound of my keyboard as the words flew from me directly onto the artificial page.

"What a beautiful night," I said out loud, to no one at all. I was alone, again. It was routine for me to be alone.

My hand reached for the bottle that I keep next to my computer. "No," I said. I opted for a cigarette instead, and moved to the open window. The room needed a new scent, because everything left in it now reminded me of you. That scent. . .

"Doesn't matter now," I said, again out loud to no one. As I lit my cigarette, my hand shook, and for a minute, I could feel your warmth. But in another second, it was gone.

I was alone, and the only sound was my breath and the steady rain.

I finished my cigarette and flicked it down the four stories from my apartment. The street was as bare as my room. Even the lights were dim tonight, probably from fog.

I returned to my desk, and took a sip from the bottle. It warmed my chest and I coughed.

I finished another chapter and looked up at my clock. 2:01, those little red numbers gave me a steady reply.

One last chance, that's all I wanted. I saved my work, not especially caring to look over it. One last chance. . . the rain kept its beat.

I turned off the bulb and went to my small bed. At least the blankets are warm, I thought to myself as I took my glasses off and set them on the nightstand. One last chance. . .

Sleep came hard that night; I tossed and turned before resting comfortably on my side. I hadn't thought it would turn out this way, but most people wouldn't have either. And so when sleep finally came, the last thought of my grueling day was one last chance, that's all I want. . .

Jennie

Melissa Anderson

You see a beautiful girl with eyes of emerald,
But I see past her fake smile to her lying green eyes,
And she curses me with her carefully chosen compliment,
Relishing the power she has to hurt me.

Jennie joins our conversation,
Poisoning the air with her flattery.
Everyone she likes feels the sweet sunshine of her favor.

They are caught in the web of her flattery,
Ensnared by the fear of her wrath,
Like helpless flies.

"Men are vending machines,"
She tells her girlfriends. "You push the right buttons,
You get what you want from them."
And her girls are merely the tools she uses,
Discarded like an old wrench when no longer useful.

Jennie's words grab your attention like a neon sign,
Full of crude humor, profanity, and dirty little secrets.
When she talks, those under her spell can't help but laugh,
Even as they are ripped to pieces by her words.

But they always forgive her,
Because, as she smiles in triumph,
Jennie sweetly declares that she is only joking.

Devin Emery

Through the Eyes of a Soldier

Cari Strunck

As we look into the eyes of a soldier, young or old, retired or active, we see a disconnection between them and the "real" world. Is this disconnection related to their overwhelming exposure to death? There is no way to know. What I do know is a story of a man that experienced war first-hand, and how it has affected him throughout his life. This man is Gregg Strunck, an Army retiree and a Vietnam veteran. He saw many acts of war during his time in Vietnam.

It is always important to know where a soldier comes from. Gregg wasn't sure what he wanted to do when he graduated high school, but he knew that he needed structure, which could be found at a military college, and that was how he came across Norwich University. When he and his parents drove up from their hometown in Connecticut to Vermont's Norwich University, he knew it was the school that he was looking for.

While he was at Norwich University Gregg received a lot of military training and realized that he was destined to be in the military. He knew that some of the finest officers came from his university and that was what he strived for. After graduating in 1963 with a distinguished military recognition, he was called up for active duty in October of the same year. He was stationed in Fort Knox, Kentucky, where he began his military training. Gregg said that the training was "top of the line for the time" and that he felt as if he was well prepared for any situation. After receiving three months of training, Gregg was given his first tour of duty an assignment in Germany in January of 1964. After being stationed in Germany for two and a half years, he came back to the States.

During 1966 and 1967, Gregg was stationed in Saigon, present-day Ho Chi Mihn, Vietnam, where he operated a tank battalion. Because his was the first tank battalion with over 30 tanks, he was given the order to "experiment and have fun and see what these tanks are made of." Under those orders, the tank battalion became the eyes and the ears of the stateside Army. Any opportunity that arose was a learning experience for him and his battalion. While experimenting, they discovered that it was imperative that they stay clear of the rice patty fields or the tanks would become stuck.

Gregg told me that they had ships that the tanks would go on in order to execute a beach assault. He recalled one incident in particular. He said that there were 17 boats with 17 tanks on board approaching the beaches of South Vietnam. When they got to the shore, the ramps lowered, and they opened fire. It was a beach assault like he'd never seen before. He said that anything that moved was shot, simply because they couldn't tell who was their enemy and who wasn't. This beach assault allowed them to see the power that these tanks had and how effectively they would work in that particular situation.

While in Southern Vietnam, Gregg was stationed along the coastal areas in the cities of DaNang, Quang Tri, and Hue. He said that Hue was almost completely destroyed during the war and it is a miracle that it is still around today. During his first tour of duty, his tank ran over a roadside bomb, and it was set off under his tank. He was blown out of the tank and was greatly injured by the explosion and the shrapnel. For this, he received a purple heart, an honor that he holds dear because he is grateful that he is alive today. He said that a lot of his friends, as well as others he served with, weren't as lucky as him. In fact, the day that he left to return to the States the Company Commander that was coming to take his place was killed. He and his driver were going over a bridge near the city of Hue and hit a mine; it detonated, and they were both killed.

He said that he was crazy, but he chose to go back for a second tour of duty in Vietnam from 1969 to 1971. During this tour, he considered himself a "military mayor" for the city of DaNang. The headquarters were based there, and he had to make sure that everything ran smoothly. During this tour, Gregg's main mission was to teach the South Vietnamese how to fight. He said that it was hard to teach them when he was working through an interpreter, but he still attempted to train them to the best of his abilities. The South Vietnamese had very little military power. The weapons that they did have were the ones that we left behind for them. The United States was getting ready to pull out of the war, and according to Gregg, it was imperative that they know how to fight. And not just how to fight, but to defend their land and their honor.

Gregg spent 39 months in Vietnam, 39 months that he would never fully recover from. This war had traumatic effects on his life that he still has to live with today. While in Vietnam, he turned to alcohol as a way to let go. Unfortunately, the alcohol that was supposed to help him forget lead to other problems. Gregg stated that if there was alcohol, there was always a party. And if there was a party, he was there—drinking himself into an inebriated mess. Gregg wasn't the only one doing this; in fact many of the men that he was around on a daily basis were doing the exact same thing. They wanted to forget what had happened and what was happening, so they drank.

When Gregg and the other troops began to return home in 1971, their homecoming was something that many of them would love to forget. They were called baby killers and criminals and received no support from their fellow citizens. Gregg said that being called a baby killer made him feel horrible because he was simply doing what he was trained to do: fight for freedom. He said that he

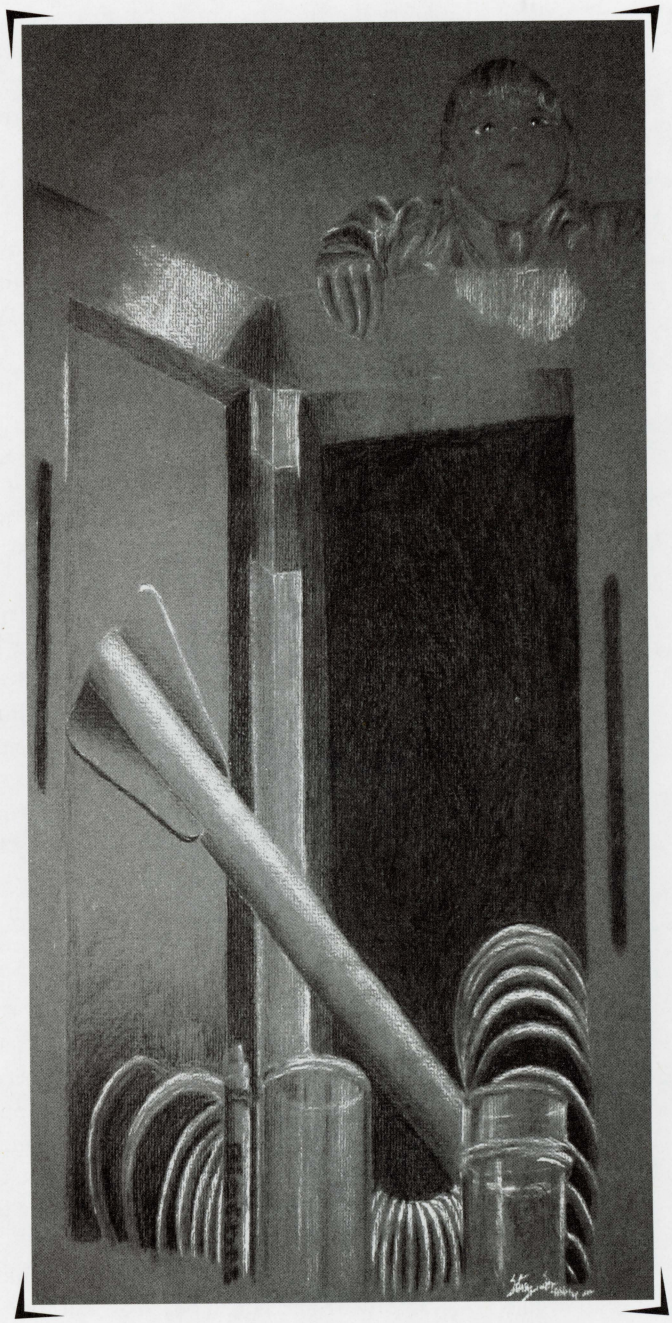
felt as if the nation had turned on them and that there were too many politicians involved in the war, which didn't allow them to do their job to the fullest. After receiving no support from the nation, and after being called baby killers, Gregg and other Vietnam veterans found the answer to their problems at the bottom of the bottle.

Once again, alcohol was the way in which the troops tried to live with what they had done, and how they were treated. Many of the veterans began to suffer from depression, self-doubt and rage — all which can lead to alcohol abuse. Gregg began to habitually turn to alcohol as his way out. He turned to it so much that he became an alcoholic.

After returning to the States, Gregg got a position at the University of Delaware, where he was a professor of Military Science in their ROTC program from 1971-1973. He said that he was warned from the beginning not to wear his uniform until he got onto the campus because of all the negative attention he might bring upon himself. So each day he went to teach, Gregg wore his civvies and packed his uniform in a duffle bag. When he got onto the campus, he changed. This was his routine every day for two years.

With everything that he has been through, Gregg now sees how the military gave him the structure that he wanted when he started college back at Norwich University. He said that the military has molded him into the person he is today. Needing to have everything in its space, Gregg admits that he is "anal retentive" and very organized. He said, "I'm a byproduct of the military, and I am proud to say that I am."

Every soldier has a story, and these stories are all many of them have. These stories can be written about in books and magazines, but they will never have the same impact as when told directly by the soldier. Gregg's experiences were truly heart-wrenching and I can now see why so many Vietnam veterans suffer such a disconnection from the "real" world. The eyes of a veteran tell more than any history book. They tell how the war affected them and how they had to deal with it. The story told by Gregg Strunck is one that I will always remember because he is my father. I see how the war affects him even today, even after becoming a recovering alcoholic. Gregg is a single man at the age of 65 with four children from his second wife. It's obvious that he hurts inside from all the pain that was caused by his drinking, but he told me that the only way to heal is to talk. So that's what we did; we talked about his experiences in Vietnam and how it affected him personally, and continues to affect him 20 years later.



Stacey Strickland

Tara Cofiell

Cayt Baynard

Natasha Barnes

Maureen Fisher

Epiphany (Upon Reading Merwin)

Ann Arbaugh

If I had not lived an unhappy childhood with no heroes
to emulate and had not taken a job rather than
go to college and had not married young and for the wrong
reasons and if he had not tried to hit me a week before Christmas while he was
drunk causing me to leave him and if I had not made
the mistakes and stumbled through my life and if
I had not gone to the dance because a friend spent twenty
minutes talking me into it and had I not made the same
mistake again and had not felt caged and dissatisfied
then I would not have applied to college and
separation would not have torn down the old me and I
would not have been unemployed and if I did not struggle
to find my own balance and had not pushed toward my goals
thinking that I had to prove something to myself and if
we had not met in law class and had not been studying the same
subject and had not become friends through years of
homework and club meetings and I had not taken the time
to eat lunch with you and had not talked about my past
over French fries and ketchup amid dozens of students
I would not have sat here listening to you tell me about your life and your worries
and I would not have heard you say
that I was your hero.

Street Lights

Stefani Beser

The light turned red as his car came to a halt at the intersection. "Great," he thought to himself, "the longest red light in the state and I've hit it." He glanced side to side at the empty intersection before him. It was slick from a recent rain, and reflected the streetlights with a shiny glow in the darkness. He normally wouldn't have been out this late, but tonight he couldn't sleep. Instead of lying in bed and staring into darkness, he had decided to run to the 7-11 for a Coca-Cola slurpee. He glanced at the cross street a second time and shook his head mournfully. There were no cars on that road, but the light still refused to change.

A light in the corner of his left eye caught his attention. He realized there was a car next to him in the turn lane. The car was the same make, model, and year as his own except it was white, whereas his was black. He peered through the glowing darkness and into the car. There was a young girl in the car, and no passengers. She was staring at the light with a look on her face like it had just punished her. He watched as she raised her hands to her face and slowly wiped away tears. He hated the light too, but it never made him cry.

Why was she crying? His mind began to race. Did somebody die? Was she having a bad day? Did some idiot break her heart? Or maybe she broke his? Maybe she got fired today, or someone she knew was seriously ill? Or maybe she was kicked out of home and didn't know where to go?

He was still watching her when she glanced to the right and caught his stare. There was no embarrassment, no hurried turning away. She appeared slightly ashamed, but didn't break the gaze. Neither of them so much as noticed when the street light's glow turned from red to green.

Patrick Keegan

Untitled

Needham B. Smith

Everything collides.
Gravity consumes my life now,
A flux explosion – neon white.
All I hear is shrill
Shrieks of the future and the past.
Metal fragments disperse,
Skin splits,
Blood sprays.
Depressurize me, wring out my sins.
I deserve this; this gloom.
My veins are tunnels of electricity,
My muscles have a seizure,
My vision is an out of focus photograph.
Confusion devours me like an instant disease,
Foreboding uncertainty.
Straining, something cracks.
Screaming, my brain boils and spine turns to dust.
Movement ceases,
Stars materialize,
Breathing, palpitating, warping sky,
Three-dimensional vision,
Smell of blood and tears and dirt,
Obscurity blooms like a vivid sunset, slowly.
Welcoming the change, forgetting everything except my lungs,
Slow, wheezing, burning inhalations.
Glancing down,
My torso is a canyon.
I whimper at myself,
Waves of horrid, sustaining fear,
Heart going wild, dancing erratically.
Head turns, eyes focus on the street,
Body crawling in headlights, slug-like, worm-like.
I whimper at him,
Sitting up, crimson flows from his neck,
Descending, hand gripping head,
Painful sorrow, spitting red,
Turning skyward with discontent.
Cloud of certainty drifting down, sucking me in.
Everything crescendos then diminuendos.

Ravenous

Jaimee Wecker

There was just something I couldn't deny within myself, something that I had to fulfill. There was a burning desire blazing inside my body, and an aching need to quench my passions.

The insatiable demands that were inflamed in my groin continued to grow, my breath becoming shallow as I tightened the muscles of my inner thighs. Throwing my head back, I began to pant, labored gasps escaping past my trembling lips.

I needed it, I needed it *now*. I had to have it, oh God, I had to have it.

Weak knees found strength in the knowledge of my impending release, and I worked my way down the hallway, feeling the wetness spreading between my legs.

Finally, oh finally, I found myself seated on that delicious toilet seat and felt my reward gushing into the toilet bowl.

Oh God, remind me never to drink that much coffee again.

Rain

Casey Mann

It's raining outside my window,
And all I can think of is you.

The thunder roars in the black sky,
And your eyes are ablaze in my mind.

The lightening strikes between the clouds,
And your smile graces my face.

The wind blows between the trees,
And your heart touches mine.

It's raining outside my window,
And I'm falling in love with you.

A Rose's Thorn

Jaimee Wecker

I wasn't really sure what I was doing at that bar. Or why I allowed that dark-haired creature to sidle up beside me, his poignant stare gazing up my legs, past my hips, and pausing perceptibly on my rounded chest. And then I let him talk me up, let his arms wrap snuggly around my waist, his body moving closer and closer to mine. Soon his lips were almost on my ear, whispering suggestive things, until his fingertips caught my cheek and turned my gaze to his own, our lips a breath apart before plunging into a blissful kiss.

And then how did we end up at my place? He was the one hitting on me, the least he could do was make the mess at his own house. I let his palms graze up my thigh, his kisses working their way past my lips, down my neck, gliding across my collarbone. And then he pulled away.

Confused, maybe alarmed, my eyes rounded, but then I relaxed as I felt my dress rising up my body, his hands deftly removing my garment with an ease that suggested he'd done it numerous times before. Clad in barely nothing, I thought I should be self-conscious, but instead I just let myself be taken in by his gaze again. He kissed me, his body pressed close to mine, his lips sealed against my own. His tongue slithered into my mouth, and I wondered where his lingering taste had come from.

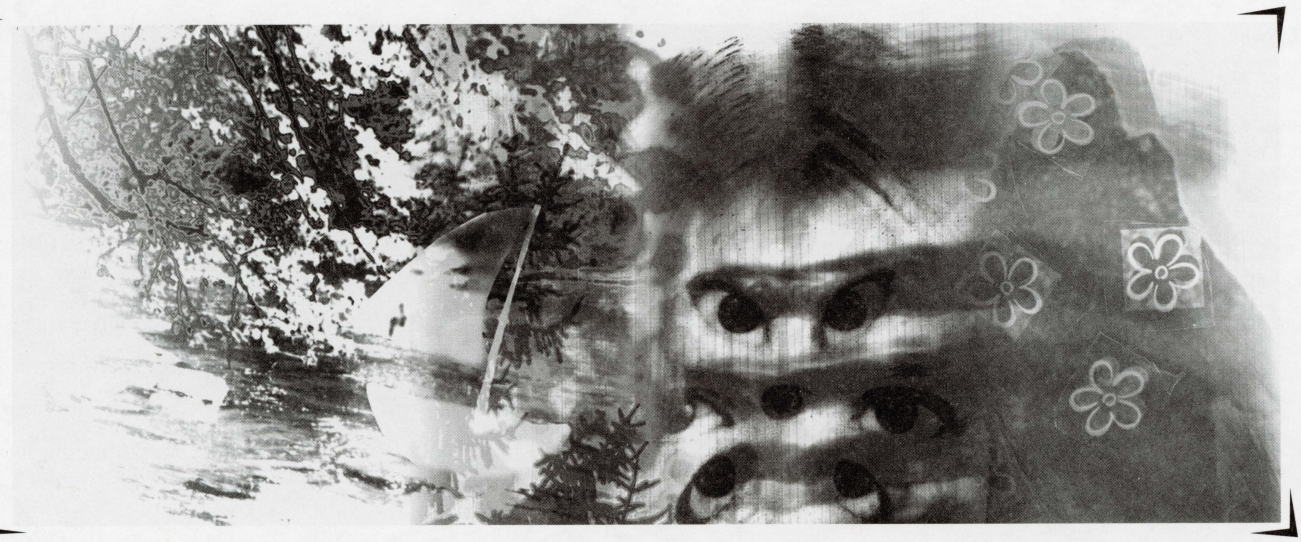
I felt him pull away again, and I felt oddly disconnected as the heat between our bodies drew cold once more. He was removing his own clothes, his button-down shirt, his pressed work pants. When he pulled me to him again, a shiver coursed through my body, as his bare flesh felt cold against my own. He kissed me again, then reached behind me, his fingers moving across my back, and I felt my skin pulled tight, then relax, as he undid my bra. I saw it drop to the floor, my eyes fixated on the rose-pattern print of the fabric. I felt his hands move around, groping against my chest, and found I was no longer able to focus on the present.

My mind wandered to my childhood, my days of running around in my rose-pattern swim suit, the very first one I'd worn to the public pool. And the fun I'd had, oh, the fun! Swimming for hours, the endless days that drifted into endless afternoons. I was blissful as I felt his body merge into mine, remembering the blue depths of the water, the deep-end that thrilled me as I leapt into it in various poses from the diving board. And I remembered that afternoon with the man, by the ice cream stand, who had lured me away with the promise of a free lollipop, and how he'd pulled down his pants and shown me just how cruel the human race could be.

When I became conscious again, the man beside me was wrapped contentedly in my sheets, his breathing regular as he drifted through sleep. I reached beside the bed, pulling from the nightstand a bottle of a rather poisonous substance if ingested orally. I dipped my finger into the contents, and then slid my naked body closer to my sleeping victim. His mouth curled into a smile as I traced a fingertip along his lips, outlining that beautiful grin. And when he'd parted them, letting my fingers slip past, he barely noticed the bitter taste that was lingering on my fingers. It didn't take long, really, and I don't suppose he ever knew what was happening. But within a few moments, as the substance had time to work its way into his saliva, possibly working down his throat, he'd gotten that look of panic. It's not quite the way they make it out to be in the movies. You don't cry out, you don't gurgle, tears don't spring to your eyes. You just die.

And that's what he did.

Hattie Hale



Stacey Strickland

Evacuation

Dan Eberle

The year is 2024. It's been seven years to the day since the first incident. What a different world it was back then. It was just a few weeks after the signing of the New World Charter. Riots protesting the new universal currency had been quelled, passports had been burned, and the standardized taxes had just come into effect. Terran, the official language of planet Earth, had just become mandatory. It was during the onset of this new era of peace and enlightenment that they struck. Charles Swanning, the CEO of Planetcom, the largest communications corporation on the planet, was the first casualty.

* * *

It was a Monday afternoon; the streets were crowded with pedestrians on their lunch breaks. Mr. Swanning decided to release his pent-up frustrations in the form of a trip to his private lavatory. His office was on the seventy-seventh floor of the Planetcom building in downtown Atlanta, overlooking the heart of the business district. As he pushed open the burnished copper door, he savored the acrid chemical smell of the cleaning solvents. He had loved that smell ever since making out with that foxy cheerleader in the high school chem lab. Walking over to the window, he peered down at all the little people he had stepped on to get where he was. God he loved his job. Now to business. He walked over to his personal urinal and unzipped, confessing to the porcelain priest. He could see his face reflected in the polished brass plumbing of the urinal—he had selected it himself. He zipped up, flushed, and…

The marble wall in front of him exploded with a deafening roar. Mr. Swanning and the contents of the room were forcefully evacuated out of the floor-to-ceiling windows, followed by a burgeoning fireball. New World citizens on the street were showered with flaming debris. One woman was struck down by the brass fixture, neither of them to flush again. When the urinal hit the asphalt, razor-sharp shards of porcelain ripped through the crowd with effects similar to anti-personnel mines. I barely escaped being crushed by Mr. Swanning's thirty-two inch plasma screen. It was the flush heard round the world.

The next day, Planetcom issued an official press release stating that Mr. Swanning's accident had been caused by faulty plumbing. Privately, the VP of the company told me that he thought Mr. Swanning had just never been properly potty trained. As one would expect, the press had a field day over the incident. One popular radio show host sympathetically suggested that it was "just his time to go," while a famous environmentalist claimed that "nature had called him home."

They waited for the press attention to simmer down before striking again. This time it was the New World Senator from France. The explosion wiped out half a city block in Paris. No one made the connection this time, either.

Most people assumed that some unnamed terrorist group had snuffed out the Senator's life as retribution for the new French bread tax. Some thought he had just pissed off the wrong person.

It was the attempted assassination of Nobel Prize winning chemist William Lloyd Schitzky that made their plot known to the world. Doctor Schitzky caught his assistant lacing the toilet resevoir with an unknown chemical. Upon analyzing the chemical, Doctor Schitzky discovered that it was a stabilized form of nitroglycerin containing an additive which reacted to the unique chemical formula contained in human urine. Upon contact with urine, the stabilizing agent relinquished its bond with the glycerin, returning it to its highly volatile state. The act of flushing would then provide enough kinetic energy to ignite the nitroglycerin, creating a massive explosion.

Coprophobia spread across the globe like a yellow tide. People all over the world were terrified of going to the bathroom. At first, psychologists assumed that the terrorist threat had awakened in people repressed childhood fears of being sucked down with the poo. Professionals from every corner of the globe made unimaginable fortunes providing "Excrement Counseling." The increasing number of incidents soon proved, however, that this new phobia was based on an all too real danger. The first month after Dr. Schitzky made his announcement, over a hundred people found themselves broken down into subatomic particles just for taking a leak.

In the ensuing weeks, dozens of arrests were made in an attempt to find the source of these terror attacks. A Latvian man, under the codename "Pope," was determined to be the mastermind and named the most wanted terrorist in the world. His infamous motto, "Give a man a toilet, relieve him for a day; blow him off it, relieve him forever," will go down in history. Depends became the highest-trading stock on the market, followed closely by janitorial companies that provided background-checked custodians to guard restrooms all over the world. The medical industry was the most affected by the bombings. The World Health Organization declared Irritable Bowel Syndrome a terminal illness, and cholera ran rampant in all the world's major cities. People of all races and socioeconomic classes began to urinate on buildings, fire hydrants, and in elevators. The streets ran yellow with urine. Hospitals were overrun by constipation and burst bladders. The world seemed to be circling down the drain.

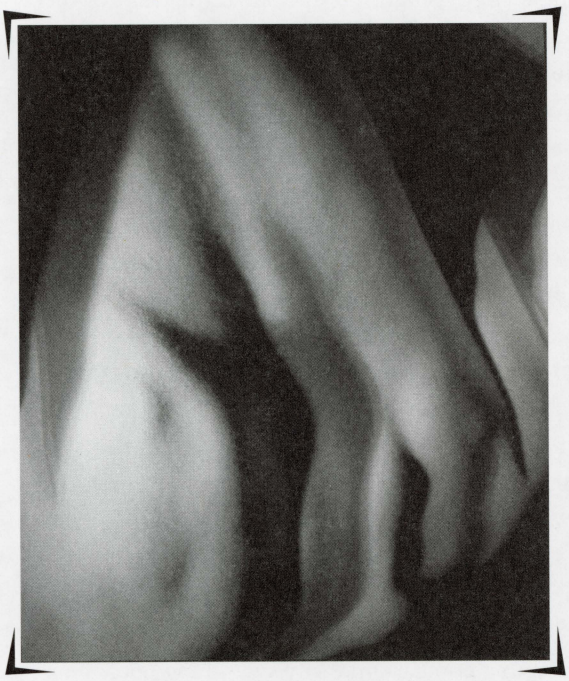
Finally, steps were taken to combat the heart of the problem. It was capitalism that finally saved the day. All the major corporations of the world began to pour billions of dollars into toilet research. Lockheed-Martin developed one toilet, codenamed Project Abyss, which made use of a molecular furnace to break down excrement into atoms. Other models required fingerprint scans for access. Eventually, through widely varied means, the use of toilets was reinstated and order was restored.

Needless to say, the "Pope" was very pissed off. He began to resort to desperate measures. Some of his men he equipped with chemical-soaked diapers. They then proceeded to enter crowded bars and order a lot of drinks. While these attacks were devastating, the terrorist group quickly ran out of men, known as "underbombers," willing to harbor explosives between their legs. One attack especially sticks in my mind. A particularly depraved agent of terror emptied a fifty gallon drum of the chemical into a popular inner city swimming pool. The next day a group of kindergarteners full of milk and juice boxes visited the pool; well, the Earth now has a new crater visible from orbit.

Despite this success, the "Pope" eventually found it necessary to participate in the attacks himself. As his final act, he and the remainder of his followers orchestrated an attack on the sewage treatment plant servicing New York City. While he succeeded in covering half the state in a cloud of flatulence for several days, he was not-so-tragically asphyxiated by the fumes.

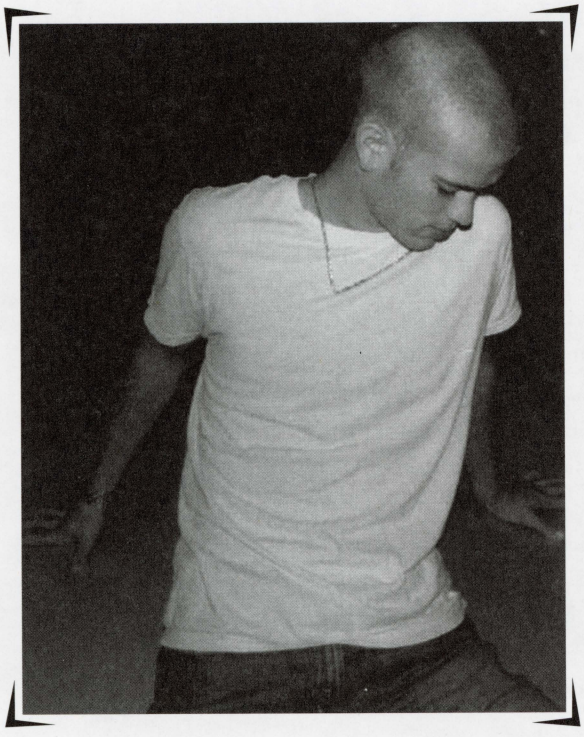
* * *

When I look back on those years, I realize what a bunch of bullshit it all was. To think we were all afraid of toilets. The odds of your pot being hot were something like one in four hundred million. Since then, I've learned that when you've got to go, you've got to go. You can only hold it for so long. The "Pope" and his men fed on fear—they made something we all have first-hand experience with an object of terror. Your generation is so comfortable—you have nothing to fear. And yet you value life so little. You fly through your days, counting on the fact that you'll always have one more. So you swim on, spinning in the current, born down ceaselessly into the drain. You stand to learn something from my generation; we cherished life, however short or painful. Like I always say—when life overflows, plunge it.



Cassandra Irby

Cayt Baynard

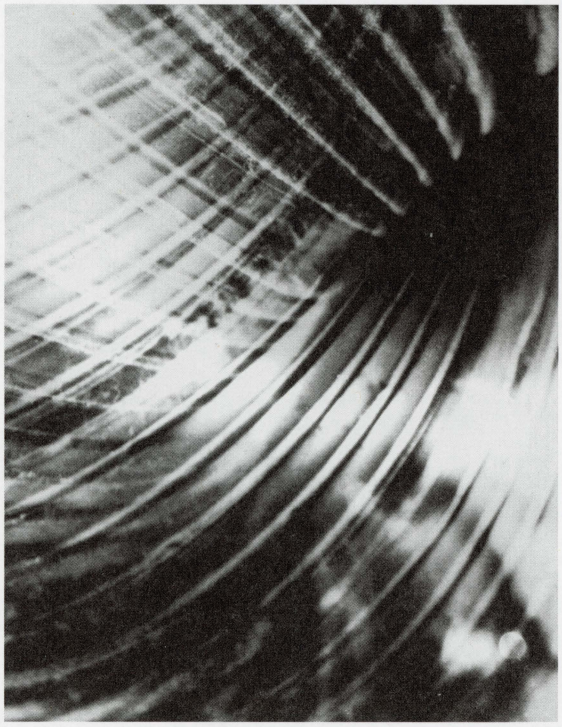


Cari Strunck

Hattie Hale

Cayt Baynard

Devin Emery



Hattie Hale

Rebecca Shoen

Unmasking the Hidden Foe

Adomba

Quietly lurking behind the ordinary,
Deep in the recesses of the heart,
Unnoticed, yet toxic and potent,
Settled, at home, and secure.
Entrenched, refusing to budge.
I can't be kicked out.
Try! I am a handful.

Aggressive resistance,
I hide deep in inner cavities of the soul.
Safe, secure, bolted behind bars.
Ill will, resentment on the prowl,
Ever eager, always watching,
I seek my victims with impunity.

Opportunity is the key.
A misspoken word or missed deed,
A misunderstanding,
Then, unsuspecting,
The prowler awakens.
I detonate with nuclear power,
Behold all my ugliness
I dump toxic wastes everywhere:
Workplace, office, home,
Wherever humans converge.

Sprawling aimlessly,
I exhale nuclear lava,
A disastrous outcrop.
Leaving behind hurt, murder, resentment,
Poisoned wells:
Faithful tokens of toxicity.

Don't recognize me?
Look carefully.
I have a face.
I refuse anonymity.
Provoked, I stir
A stellar record:
Holocaust, exterminations, inhumanity,
Rwanda, Kosovo,
Jerusalem, Gaza strip,
Ireland, Iraq, Serbia.
Need I go on?

My résumé of numerous captives:
Kings, servants, rich, poor, men, women,
Conservatives, Liberals, Independents
Worship at my altar.

Phobias my bedfellows,
Unthinking, unfeeling, uncritical,
Paranoid, prejudiced, and pernicious
Cozy and reliable allies.

Empathy, kindness, openness
I detest with passion!
Dialog, sense and goodwill
Are dreaded mortal foes;
Keep them away from me.
Brush them aside.
Pour asphalt over them.
Secure my safety
Till I prowl for my next victim.

Offend

Elizabeth Rockey

Remind me next time not to open my mouth
For even a sip of soda.
Words may escape,
And most likely it will be a build-up of feelings
That have nothing to do with you,
But will come out like they do.

Magnets

Stefani Beser

Our force field hangs perilously,
Shifting and swirling between us.
Afraid of our poles repelling,
We inch closer and away,
Closer and away,
And closer,
Until we jump at each other
And find that we stick

Unmasking the Hidden Foe

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Act III: Scene I

Tristan Baughman

SETTING: A local bar in downtown Philadelphia. JACKSON and JAKE are at the bar downing their respective drinks.

JACKSON: Wow, did you try this scotch?

JAKE: Nah, I'm about done.

JACKSON: C'mon, how often do we go out drinking? Have another one. This one's on me.

JAKE: All right.

JACKSON: Man, this reminds me of when I was in Scotland last year. I went to this pub called The Guilford Arms. *Fantastic!* I told you that you should have went. And right across the street they had a place that sold deep fried Mars-Bars.

JAKE: Really?

JACKSON: Seriously man, I couldn't believe it. It was like sex, but I was having it.

JAKE: (Laughs.) God, I still can't believe that plan worked. I got to hand it to you; I thought we'd be in jail or dead by now.

JACKSON: That's why you have to have a little faith in me. You know, I'm in such a good mood I think I might try to hook up with one of the girls here.

JAKE: Can't you leave that for another night? Katie is going to be pissed if I don't come home soon. And we still have to take care of all that money.

JACKSON: I would, but, see, a random hook up is kind of like a half-eaten sandwich sitting in the refrigerator. You don't know where it's been or who ate it last, but its 2 o'clock in the morning and you're hungry. And…I'm pretty hungry right now. (JAKE looks out the front window and gets a shocked and terrified look on his face.)

JAKE: ….SON OF A BITCH!

JACKSON: (Confused) What?

JAKE: THE TRUCK'S GONE! (Stands up.)

JACKSON: (calmly) All right, just sit down. Maybe it got towed or something. There is no way anyone knew what we were up to. I'll just make a few calls and I'm sure we'll get it back.

JAKE: How are we going to get it back if we don't know where it is? I'm glad I've been drinking or I'd be pretty upset by now.

JACKSON: Let's just pay the bill and get out of here. (Reaches in pockets and finds no wallet.) Ohh, you've got to be kidding me. I left my wallet in the truck; you'll have to cover it.

JAKE: I only brought five bucks.

JACKSON: Five dollars, we just got all that money and you only have five dollars in your wallet? How did you expect to pay for your drinks?

JAKE: Just… never mind. How are we going to pay?

JACKSON: Don't worry I know how we can get out of this. I've used it before when I'm low on cash. You just go to the bar and act like your meeting a group of people. I'll call you on my cell phone, and you act like the people you're talking to are having car problems. Then we wait about a half hour and then I'll call you back again. Then all you have to do is say loudly, "Oh my God they're dead. The tire fell off and they drove off a cliff, oh God!" and start crying. Then simply run outside and we start looking for the truck. We didn't pay, but you'd have to be a heartless bastard to call the police on someone who just lost all his friends in a car accident.

JAKE: (Laughs.) That's brilliant man.

JACKSON: I'm telling you, it's all in the plan. If you don't give someone a reason to doubt you, they won't.

Fresh Dancing Words

Glenn Klug

Dust motes dance through
The afternoon air,
Cascading crashes of thought.

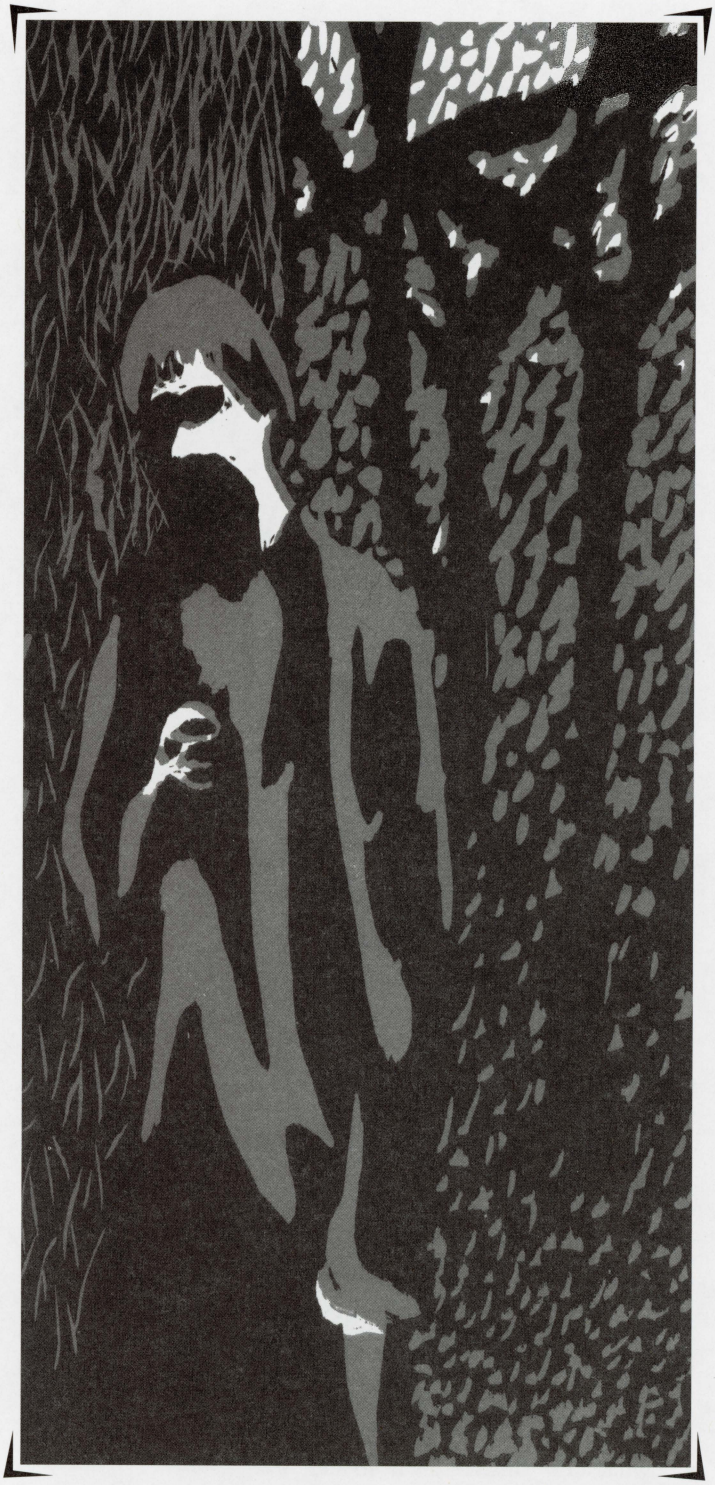
Words join while lines form,
Stanzas may follow.
Poems are born of the soul.

Fresh blood upon page,
The heart is poured out,
And the mind may rest again.

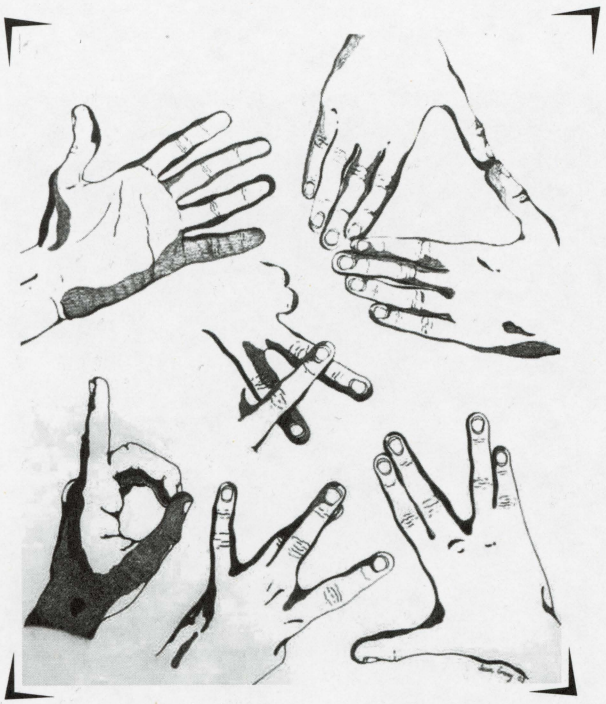
Sigh of Relief

Craig Pfisterer

I've found
Momentary freedom
Like dew on leaves
Dripping from trees
To the end of time



Stacey Strickland



Devin Emery

Cassandra Irby

Epilogue Three

Nikki Dey

Stuck in a whirlpool of discontents,
while lying on a concrete floor of bitterness,
each day our plans revolve around what restaurant
and what drink will be next.
And then a laugh, another sip, another smile,
eyes widen, common sense collapses,
another bad memory,
another hidden smile opens
to cover the rest up,
a twirling cup,
a shadowed resolution,
one that never ended, one that never started,
and I'm looking around trying to figure out
what all of this sorrow is about,
how they'll never admit it's not okay,
how they'll never admit it was bad parenting.

Another Man's Treasure

Brandon Holthaus

My first car was a 1989 Ford Taurus. It was faded colors of blue and rust. It had no light bulbs on the inside and no keyhole in the driver's side door. To get into the driver's seat I had to climb in through the passenger side door. The stereo would play, but the display would not light up. So I could only hope I was listening to 98 Rock instead Lite 101.9. It still had an engine and it still ran, except for when I went on the highway and tried to go over fifty-five, and then it would shake and I was unable to steer. I named it Tantric after the rock group because they had a song called "Breakdown." It was a good first car. I tried my best to fix it up. I had seat covers, window decals, and an air freshener to get out the smell of rancid water.

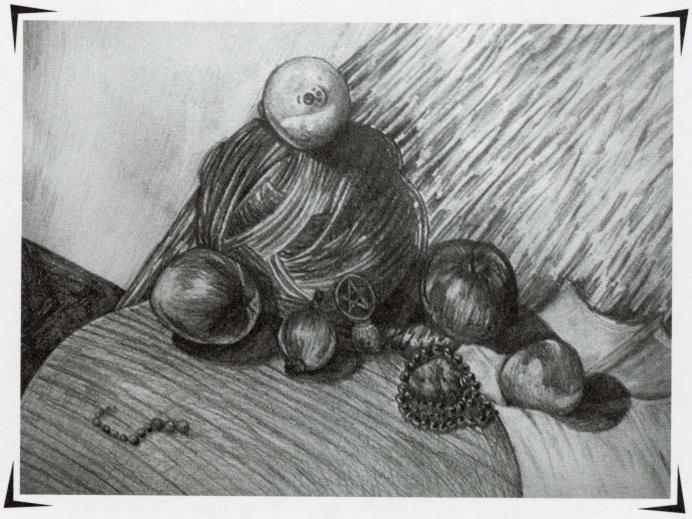
The biggest problem, though, came in mid-winter. It began to snow lightly, so I turned on my windshield wipers. After it stopped snowing, I wanted to turn them off. Only I couldn't. I hit the switch but they kept wiping the already clean windshield. I had no idea what to do. I went to a friend of mine's father and asked him. He said there was a short and that I had to unplug the wires going to the wiper motor. Whenever it would rain I would have to turn them on under the hood.

A couple months later I went to my cousin and asked him what I should do. He told me I could come into the junkyard he managed and look around and take what I needed. So when the weather got nice in June I went to Erdman Auto Parts on Erdman Avenue to see my cousin. My friend's father came as well to help me out. My cousin pointed me in the directions of the Fords and told me to take what I needed.

I walked down the aisles and looked at the skeletons of cars. Mercedes, GMCs, and Pontiacs, just to name a few. Their organs had been removed and put into new cars. I saw the results of car crashes: minivans made into convertibles and trucks made into European compacts. I had to watch where I stepped to make sure I didn't step on glass from the broken windows. I heard tools screeching from the garage and saw forklifts pick up whole cars and move them to other areas.

We finally made it to the Taurus's and became surgeons. I had my tools and looked for the windshield wiper motor. We were lucky, they had one left. Instead of yelling scalpel, we yelled, "wrench" or "ratchet". We took out the screws and unplugged the kidney of the Ford Taurus, the oh-so-important windshield wiper motor. The surgery was successful and we took out the motor with minimal damage. We also took a cassette player out of a '92 Taurus and a clock from an '89 Taurus. We even got a couple of light bulbs so I would know when my door was ajar.

We fixed up my car and returned to the junkyard often. After I gave my Taurus to another cousin, I got a '93 GMC Jimmy. As for the Taurus, it also returned to the junkyard, completing the car circle of life.



Cayt Baynard

Stacey Strickland

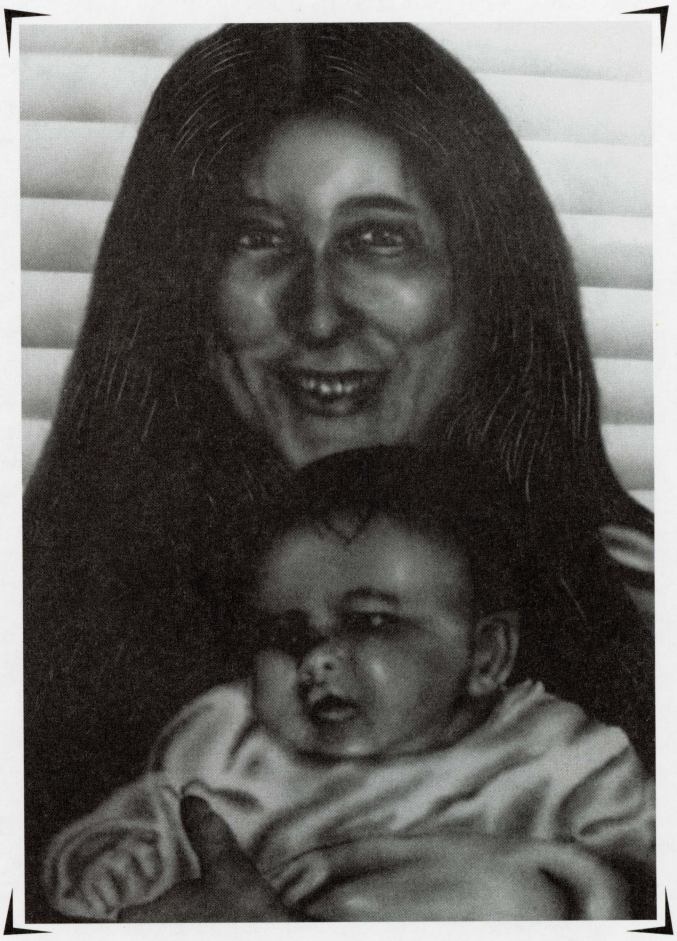
In the Dark

Kellie Hale

These big brown eyes
Cry imaginary tears.
These lips
Spout sound without meaning.
What lies ahead
As well as beneath
Is concealed.
Darkness follows.

These arms
Reach out for
Feigned affection.
Broken hearts
Attempt bonds with broken stone.
To venture ahead
Or even to stay is futile.
Darkness returns.

These hands
Grasp for imaginary figures
In the distance,
No further than near.
Where it dwells
Is where we are,
But darkness covers all.



Stacey Strickland

poor little fishy

Shannon Lay

poor little fishy
swimming all alone,
his whole world's afloat.
look at the poor plastic plant
as fake as that little castle where he never goes.
poor little fishy.
swimming all alone,
all his friends are gone.
he looks at me with his
unblinking
fish eyes
that know
he's going to be
eaten.

To Bee

Glenn Klug

I am resigned to be
A worker bee, for
Beauty, be it art
Or air, holds nothing.
Instead I love the
Simple sound of om,
Along with the bright
Con, contrary swirl
Of the sunflower bloom.

Confessions of a Twenty-something Tea Snob

Jessica Badalato

I had an assignment. I had an assignment sheet, with a variety of essay topics to choose from. And I must say that I wanted to write my latest essay on the topic that centered on the Stephen Hawking quote.

It went along the lines of, "If we're not careful, machines will eventually evolve past us and conquer us." It couldn't be too hard of a topic, and I wouldn't mind a break with an easier essay assignment. Maybe I'd have time to knit over the week.

Then, I made a few critical errors. First, I pulled the assignment sheet out of my handy multi-sectional expanding file folder. The good news was that I found the assignment sheet. The bad news was that I set it on my desk so I could reference it as I wrote. Then I left the paper on the desk and went into the kitchen to make a cup of tea. When I came back, my paper was gone. Disappeared. Vanished. Generally not there.

I have a theory on where it went: my copy of *The Autumn of the Patriarch* gobbled it up for revenge. This paperbound gem written by García Marquez was last week's reading assignment for my satirical literature class. It got vehemently hurled away when I didn't need it anymore. It flew across the room and flopped onto the floor. I left. When I came back, the book was gone. I'm not putting that one into my term paper, so I didn't think anything of it – until my essay writing assignment sheet turned up missing, and I found *Patriarch*, complete with naked dead guy on the cover, sitting in its place. Dammit, a naked dead guy ate my assignment sheet. I *knew* I should have studied the assignments more carefully earlier this week. The essay draft was due in a matter of hours, and the essay-related thoughts I had bouncing around in my mind this week aren't as clear as when I had the assignment sheet sitting in front of me. Now what?

Of course! One of the other essay topics had something to do with writing about things you take for granted.

I looked around my room to find something to write about within this topic, but I couldn't find anything, being far too busy taking everything for granted. The in-class prewriting exercises related to this topic generated a brief list with crickets and ring-necked snakes at the top. That sounded boring, so I started listing things in my room: a sewing machine in serious need of professional cleaning, an XP-loaded computer showing its age by its severe lack of RAM, a Win98-loaded fossil plugged in only as my third or fourth source of Word document emergency backup, a cute little plaid stuffed dragon that Scribe gave me as an early birthday present at the Rennfest, and a stoneware mug of steadily cooling tea.

Tea! Now *there's* something I take for granted. Tea in mug, tea in general, my attachment to tea. That works. So, this essay is brought to you by tea.

I drink tea almost every evening, which is why I take it for granted. My evening routine goes as follows: come home from work or school, walk through the kitchen to my room, drop books onto bed or desk, turn on computer, walk back into room to connect to the Internet, walk back into kitchen and measure out loose Earl Grey into tea strainer, pour water, steep, remove strainer, walk back into room and grossly multitask until after midnight. Amid chatting, homework, and movies, the tall, steaming mug is a small but essential part of my evening. Without tea, I tend to snack. Since Earl Grey is a black tea, and black teas have more caffeine than any other tea, I also need it to stay awake. Sure, coffee has more caffeine, but there are only a handful of places that make a good cup of coffee, and my kitchen isn't one of them. Soda also has more caffeine, but unsweetened hot tea is considerably healthier, and I don't get enough healthy things in my system over the semester.

When tea is in abundance, I don't think about it much. But when I don't have my tea, I miss it. For example, I ran out of Earl Grey two weeks ago. As I measured the last one-and-a-half teaspoons of the dark leaves into the strainer, I knew that I had too many expenses to just drive to Columbia and buy more. Both of my back tires went flat this weekend and needed to be replaced, I had an interview coming up and needed a suit, and my sister decided she wanted me to drive her around to shop, but forgot to tell me that the payment for the gas, mileage, and time I'd spent would have to come next week, when she got paid.

Tea was not high on the priority list, so I did some reconnaissance in the tea cabinet. The tea cabinet in my house is a dangerous place. My pack rat mom believes that tea has no expiration date. She wouldn't know whether it does or not, because she goes through a steady supply of Tetley to make iced tea, so she doesn't have any boxes of it lying around for more than a few weeks. No, the hazardous materials in the tea cabinet don't include my loose Earl Grey in its special airtight tin, nor (from a within-the-expiration-date standpoint) my mom's supply of family-sized Tetley bags. It's the herbal tea. It sits in the cabinet, bought because Mom thought Dad might like it. Nobody drinks it, whatever it is. It's been open once or twice, a couple of spoonfuls or a couple of bags are gone, and then it sits. And sits. During my recon mission, I impressed my ten-year-old brother by pulling out a box of Red Zinger that expired seven months before he was born. Thankfully, I also came out with a still fresh box of Tazo's Awake breakfast blend, and half a box of Twinings' Blackcurrant tea bags. They weren't loose, but they'd do.

I went through that routine. Get home, drop stuff, boil water, drop bag in mug, pour water, surf Web and do homework. And then on Monday, I used my last Blackcurrant bag.

The plan had been to buy tea on Sunday, when I'd be near enough to Columbia to stop at the mall. Teavana, the tea store there, has very nice Earl Grey, as well as other teas which cost far more than I can afford. If you can afford $25 for two ounces of Monkey Picked Oolong, good for you. You go buy that, and I'll pick up twice that of my black-and-bergamot goodness for $7.60 and tax. No, thanks, I don't want to buy the special airtight tin – just put it into a paper bag and I'll transfer it to my special airtight tin at home. If I'd remembered to bring it with me, I'd get ten cents off the total price. There was only one problem with this plan: I already had a daytrip planned elsewhere, away from my favorite brand. I bought a cup from a new tea store closer to home, but there was just something wrong about the taste. One of my friends recently accused me of turning into a "tea snob."

So, here I am – sans tea – poking around Trader Joe's on break between Astronomy and Essay Writing. I thought surely the great Trader Joe's would have loose Earl Grey, and probably organic at that. I walk in, and look around for the tea section, which greets me with cardboard box after cardboard box of tea bags. I look down to see can after can of chai powder greeting me from the bottom shelf. Eww. I don't have a knack for making good chai from powder at home. And I don't want chai. I want Earl Grey with its wonderful citrusy flavor and anti-depressant qualities. I can feel the lack of it getting to me right now, just with the thought of having to wait a week to get more. In final desperation, I walk into Starbucks.

Right in the middle of some sort of rush. I didn't know that there was a 10:10 rush, but there it was. But there's tea. Good, nice, yummy tea for my now sore throat. Tazo's Earl Grey tea bags, but they will do. I get a grande, and head back to campus.

Of course, I'll have to figure out what I'm going to do this evening, after I come home from school. I thought I saw a fresh box of Vanilla Hazelnut in the cabinet. Not exactly what I want, but it will work in a pinch. I'll also see if I can Xerox someone else's assignment sheet, and maybe, while I'm pondering tonight's lack-of-tea situation, rewrite this essay using the Hawking quote. But I kind of like this.

Amanda Smit

Swinging

Melissa Anderson

When I push you away, you pull me closer.
As I rise up, you dip me back down,
Helpless and fragile in your strong arms.

Spinning back up to dizzying heights,
Your touch guides me back to earth,
Continuing the chase as the music swings on.

Tell Me You Love Me, Tell Me Again

Andy Beres

No one ever charged the night with larceny, but it stole the day just the same. No one ever called the wind a bastard, but the thought was there by choice or otherwise. He tried in vain to zip up his jacket, but the labor was fruitless by faulty hands, hands made numb and dry and useless by hours of exposure to a chill he reckoned was only his.

He buried his hands deep in his pockets and hopped about as if it would help, and when in the near distance she saw him, she couldn't help but smile at the mess of a man he was, an agglomeration of chattering teeth and enervated limbs and pleading eyes that knew loss and agony and fear but could never quite summon those things when he looked upon her face. Those eyes were lost just now, though, desperate. For the first time, she saw him for what he was without her, understood just how much she gave him and how dearly he needed it. He
didn't see her and she kept on looking, feeling much the part of a telescope looking back in time as his eyes regressed to the day he was born, innocent and curious and terrified, thrust into an existence he had no hope of comprehending, but looking, looking, always looking and always trying.

The wind picked up and she felt herself shiver, so consumed with his affairs and that she hadn't noticed the chattering of her own teeth. And though the moment had passed too quickly, she knew it had passed all the same and that in all her life, it would never come again. She walked toward him, avoiding cracks in the sidewalk to spare more luck of a dubious nature. As she went, she looked at the curb, littered every few feet with Christmas trees dead or dying, and she frowned at the once proud pines strewn about like garbage.

He saw her then and stumbled forward on heavy legs which mistook the air for molasses. She smiled at him, watching in amusement his transformation—his poor posture correcting itself, the creases in his forehead evening out, the light spreading through his eyes and into his smile. Nothing he'd ever done or would ever do
mattered a bit to him. He knew how logic and the world said this would end, but he harbored, in that instant, no helplessness or hopelessness or cynical reservations. The devil could do his worst.

She stopped and stood in front of him, wisps of tinted hair blown across her forehead, her eyes unsure as she fought the cold and her own inclinations. He never thought of fighting his. She didn't know what to say, only what she had to do, and though she thought and thought, nothing came.

The wind picked up and he watched her shake, watched her hair sacrifice further its general perfection. He reached out and brushed the locks off of her forehead and behind her ear, his hand lingering there, cupping absently the side of her head.

He sighed and she sighed and they looked over at the curb, at the withering thing that had occupied his living room, anemic now for loss of needles and without any of the majesty it had known on Christmas morning. She looked back at him with unclear eyes.

"They never last," she said of the tree. "They never could last. It just doesn't make sense."

He looked away a moment. Then, he gestured with a tilt of his head toward the towering pine to the left of his house. It stood proud and full and sad for its brethren. He watched it and smiled and then he turned then back to her.

"That used to be a Christmas tree, you know. I planted it about fifteen years ago."

She looked at it curiously.

"The neighbors wanted to cut it down, but you can't cut down a tree like that, some organic thing with so much magic. You never can tell if a thing will last. They said it wouldn't that day I planted it, but I knew better."

She looked back at him.

"I knew because the only things that are worth their weight are a suspect leap of faith."

Her eyes changed, something about them he couldn't place, and her voice slipped out into the wind, so soft it shouldn't have reached him.

"Tell me you love me."

He did.

"Tell me again."

He just kept telling her.

Dream Big

Amanda Bory

"Mom!"…"Honey! …"Jayne, where did you put my ironed dress shirt?"…"What'd you fix for my lunch, Mom?"… The story of my life: fast, need-based calls for Mother and Wife. After twenty years of marriage and three kids, my life boiled down to fixing breakfast, doing the laundry, helping with homework assignments, paying bills, and coordinating family dinners. What happened to *me?* When did I lose myself in this thing called life? I once was a woman of grace, of beauty, of confidence. I once was a woman who dreamed dreams and made them realities – who knew what she wanted and where she belonged in the world. I once knew myself. I once was Mary Jayne Ziegler, proud twenty-something girl with long chestnut brown hair, curves, and ruby-red lips. And now…I am a wrinkled face, a sallow body, salt and pepper hair clipped close for convenience, and empty, ashen eyes - the windows to my brittle soul. My husband insists that I'm still the "beautiful woman" he married twenty years ago, but I fail to see that woman in the mirror. I am no longer a dreamer, but a role-filler. I am Mother and Wife.

* * *

"You need to get out," he said. I agreed.

"Where should I go?" I questioned with a hopeless voice.

He took my face gently in his hands. "Honey, find someplace that will make you happy. You do so much around here –maybe you need a change of scenery. The kids are old enough to take care of themselves. And just think, in a year when the last one leaves for college, what will you do? You'll no longer have to take care of everyone twenty-four hours a day."

I am too depressed, too tired, to get angry and express my frustrations. My body melts into a kitchen chair and my eye catches the collage of pictures on the refrigerator – pictures of high school graduations, first days of school, first steps - and then I see the picture of me, young Mary Jayne, in my pink-and-white jumper, next to a thick elderly woman with thinning hair, shielding her magical eyes tinted with mischief. I smile and remember Miss Edna.

As a teenager, I worked for the local Assisted Living program. Miss Edna was my favorite resident. I loved to hear the sensational stories of her wild childhood, scandalous love affairs, and secret confessions. Our relationship was mutual. She respected me and my idealistic thoughts at a time when most of the people in my life rejected my dreams. "Dream big, dear. Dream big so you can inspire others to dream even bigger," she used to advise. Miss Edna died the summer of my high school graduation. Three days after my graduation, to be exact. I attended her funeral and met her family – the family I heard so much about during the four years I spent with Miss Edna. I saw the family resemblance, especially in her one daughter who had almost the same exact eyes as Miss Edna. I mourned her death and I grieved the loss of my friend, my confidante.

* * *

I looked at the vastness of the stark white building before me. Bold, black letters arched over the main entrance that read, "Gildore Assisted Living: Welcome Home." *How this place has changed!* I thought. I approached the front desk and introduced myself to the smiling blonde woman behind the computer.

"Can I help you?" she asked, the smile on her face infiltrating her lilting voice.

"Yes – I think so," I stammered. I coughed and cleared my parched throat. "I used to volunteer here as a teenager and I wanted to, maybe, start back up again. I just wanted someplace to go and get out of the house," I said, laughing a bit to hide my embarrassment over my confession.

"Of course," soothed the receptionist. "We'd love to have you around here and we're glad you've come back! Let me go get Jan – our activities coordinator. She'll show you around – I'm sure things have changed since the last time you walked these halls."

Jan and I walked down the hallway. She gestured with her hands to various rooms, but I barely listened. I focused more intently on the people, feeble and lost. Most of them scratched across the wooden floors with walkers, looking at their paths with glazed eyes. Most of those with wheelchairs were being pushed by a nurse in a crisp uniform; others sat idle, hands clasped, heads down. *I don't remember this,* I thought. *I don't remember so much isolation and depression.* We approached the "living room" and I noticed a woman lying on the couch, swaddled in quilts. Her eyes sank into her head, but they darted around frantically, as if she were frightened.

Jan, following my gaze, turned and said to me, "That's Miss Helen. She frightens easily." A pained look came over Jan's plump face. "We are not quite sure what happened to her as a child, but it seems to still haunt her."

Walking over to the couch she cheerily addressed her, "Hello, Miss Helen! How are you today?" The woman turned her wide eyes to Jan and looked petrified as she fumbled with the blankets, pulling them tighter around her small frame.

"I *told* you he *hurts* me, Mother! And you *let* him do *it* every single time!" she shouted with an eerily vicious voice. "Don't let him come near me again! Please, please, p-p-please!" she shuddered. "*Don't* let him hurt me again, *Mother!*" And then she dissolved in tears, hiccupping and convulsing under her shroud of blankets. Two nurses quickly came over and sedated her. I watched with horror as the old woman's gray eyes, which were blank when I first approached, filled with dark, black smoke as she spoke —

and then faded and filled with the void sedation supplies.

"Let's move on," Jan said to me. I walked with her, glancing over my shoulder until we turned the corner. Something about her eyes seemed so familiar, as if I had once looked in the mirror and saw those same empty gray eyes staring back…

* * *

Jan continued to show me around. I met a few other residents, most of whom seemed much older than I ever remembered as a teenager – and much more dejected. We had reached the end of the tour and Jan left me for a moment to attend to a resident. I thought about how Gildore had changed and the things I had witnessed today. *What am I doing here?* I thought. *This place is depressing – an evil reminder of my "enticing" future. How can I rediscover myself here? All I can do is watch "age" debilitate the lives of others and drown with them in their miseries.*

I noticed a plaque adorning the door in front of me. "*Memories*" it read in beautiful raised script. I entered the large room. Every inch of wall was covered in pictures; pictures in black and white, sepia, and full color. They represented a harmonization of the last fifty years. My hand smoothed over the thin glass, tracking the history of those who have died and those who were still living. My hand crossed over a faded color photo and – my hand raced back to it. There, underneath my finger, was the picture that was posted on my refrigerator; me and Miss Edna, standing next to each other. A lump formed in my throat. Miss Edna's smiling face looked back at me through the glass – her eyes, lit with enchantment, stared into mine. I knew I had to stay. This was what Miss Edna would want me to do. *Dream big so you can inspire others to dream bigger.* I smiled.

I heard a creak behind me and I turned towards the door. Standing in the doorway was Jan, a little out of breath, smiling that warm, now-familiar grin. "I've been looking for you. I saw the door was ajar, so I thought you may have wandered into here. I hope I'm not disturbing you," she said sheepishly.

"Not at all," I replied, as I quickly wiped away my tears. "I was just admiring the photos. I guess I lost track of time." I shrugged my shoulders and returned Jan's compassionate smile.

We walked together down the long corridor. We approached apartment 406 and Jan knocked gently. "Margaret Voika lives here," she explained. "She's a very quiet lady. She seems lonely today. I think that you are just the person to cheer her up," she said to me with kind eyes.

"Come in," a strong voice answered through the wooden door. Jan turned the brass knob and entered. I followed behind her like a dutiful assistant.

"Good afternoon Miss Margaret!" exclaimed Jan in her usual jubilant voice. "I'd like you to meet Mary Jayne – she's one of our newest volunteers. Perhaps you'd like to talk with her for a little while?" asked Jan.

Taurean Washington

"I'd like that very much," answered Margaret in a deep alto voice. I could not see Margaret very well, for Jan's body blocked my view. Then, Jan turned around, winked at me, and walked out of the room. It was then that I saw Margaret, a healthy looking older woman with short, curly gray hair. She had a thick figure that reminded me of my Miss Edna, the kind of woman whose fuller figure always looked inviting, whose eyes always held a twinkle of mischief, a glint of magic. *This woman doesn't belong here!* I thought. *She looks like she's as coherent and strong enough to live on her own. How sad it must be for her to live amongst those who are so fragile.*

"Well, child," said Margaret, "are you going to stand there and stare at me all day or are you going to sit down and have a chat?" asked the old woman.

Our relationship blossomed. Miss Margaret said she came from a large family, and that she was raised on a farm turned into a bed and breakfast. "How did you end up in Maryland?" I asked.

"Ahh," she said with a smile. "I met George Voika. He stayed one evening at the Bed and Breakfast when he hit bad weather. George," she said, "was a business man. He wanted to open up his own brewery and was traveling to learn about his craft. I remember how handsome I thought he was," she said with that glint of magic in her eyes. "He walked in the front door with snow covering his black coat and frost in his mustache. His nose was running, his eyes were bloodshot, and his lips were cracked from the cold weather – and I thought he was the most handsome man I ever saw." I looked at Miss

Margaret and giggled, imagining the horrid picture of a half-frozen man walking into her small farmhouse.

"Oh, he was gruff," Miss Margaret said, her voice deepening with fervor, "but his eyes were kind. Momma put him in the room with the fireplace – right below my bedroom. That evening, I slept on the floor, listening to him bustling about. Oh, I was in love!" she cried, color in her pale cheeks. "The next morning, I got up early and made him a special breakfast. I knocked on his door, set down the tray, and ran like Hell. When I came back later to clean his room, the tray was on his dresser, and a little note was tucked under his napkin that read Thank you."

"He left the next day, after the snow storm, and I mourned his absence. But three weeks later he returned on his trip back to Maryland. He stayed for a whole week and he courted me from day one. By the end of the week, he professed his love for me, and I for him. We were engaged on Friday, married on Saturday, and arrived in Maryland on Wednesday – a newly wedded couple."

"What a quick love affair!" I exclaimed to Miss Margaret.

"Affair?" she questioned. "No dear, it was no affair. We were in love – true love for forty-eight years." Her eyes momentarily darkened and I wanted to ask, why only forty-eight years? but I didn't. She'd tell me in time.

I watched the gray woman rock back and forth in her chair, reminiscing with me about her life, her family. She then told me about her two children and their successful lives. She listed, counting off on her fingertips, all nine of her grandchildren and pointed to their pictures on her mantle. "Cherubs," she called them. "with little Devil's horns," she added with a laugh.

She sighed and her grin melted slowly into a firm line. "That's my husband, George," she said, pointing to yet another photo on her crowded mantle. On the corner, there was a framed photo of Miss Margaret and an older gentleman. He stood stiffly next to her, but his hand rested softly on her waist, curling around the contours of that familiar-grandmother figure.

"That picture was taken at the christening of our youngest grandchild last year," she said wistfully. Then, tears filled her eyes once more and she said, "George died two weeks later of a brain aneurysm, the doctors say. It was very sudden."

She put her head down and I saw her shoulders shake with silent tears. I leaned over and held her hand, even though I felt it wasn't enough. She looked up a few minutes later.

"I didn't mean to cry," she apologized. "But I miss him so much."

"How did you end up at Gildore?" I asked softly.

"I've been a Type One diabetic since I was twenty-two," she explained. "George always took such good care of me. When he died, I was scared to live alone. I moved in with my daughter, but I felt like a burden, even though she insists I wasn't. Like my mother, I asked to be moved here, to let my kids live happily on their own. She lived here for four years before she passed away. I hope that I'll be here longer. I figured I'd be best taken care of here.

Devin Emery

Nurses are on staff all day long and I don't have to worry about my medicine; they do George's work for me. So, here I am today, sitting here, talking with you, dear," she said fondly.

I tried to think of things I could say to make her happy. I racked my brain for something that could help ease her loneliness, but the same nagging question continued in my head – the question that I first felt inclined to ask the moment I saw myself mirrored in Miss Margaret's life. I felt like a failure. I couldn't think of a single optimistic thing. So much for "inspiring" others, I thought. My secret question continued to tear at me, but I held the thought at bay.

The old lady leaned closer to me and whispered gently, "Why don't you just ask, dear?"

Startled, I leaned back quickly. Ask? How did she know? I thought frantically. "Excuse me?"

"Something seems to be bothering you. My husband used to do the same thing when he was hiding something. He'd get that same pained look in his eyes."

I couldn't hold back any longer. "Listening to you today, Miss Margaret, I see how much of your life mirrors mine. And yet, you seem so happy. I feel guilty for feeling a twinge of jealousy because I don't feel the same way you do. I mean, in many ways I do – I love my family and I can't imagine life without them. But I also resent

them at times. I'm no longer 'Mary Jayne.' I'm 'Mom' and 'Honey.' My life revolves around dirty clothes and frozen chicken breasts," I said quickly. I leaned toward Miss Margaret, my hands shaking. "Do you understand?" I asked.

She leaned close to me and took my face in her wrinkled, aged hands. "Yes, dear," she said. "I had hard times, too. But think: what would you do without your family's needs? Doesn't a part of you *depend* on having things to do? You are not just 'Mom' and 'Wife.' You are Mary Jayne, who is a wife, mom, lover, friend, confidante, chef, psychologist, seamstress, sage – and an inspiration, don't you see?" Margaret's voice shook. "You are a dreamer, for who else could maintain so many roles? It is rare to find a woman so strong that is also so compassionate. I love my family. I take pride in my work and my family is my work – a finished product that always needs a little bit of re-shining and re-shaping. I am still the seamstress at times for my family, the chef, the mentor. And I'm still a lover and wife. I write to my husband everyday in my journal. I talk to him while I do the dishes. I'm Margaret Voika – Renaissance woman."

"So you see, Mary Jayne," Margaret fervently said, "You are not just 'Mom' and 'Honey.' My mother always used to tell me to 'dream big so you can inspire others to dream bigger' – and you do that - for your kids, your husband, your friends - and you've done that for me today by inspiring me to dream again about my life - my incredibly blessed life."

My eyes widened at the familiar phrase. I looked at Miss Margaret. Her eyes – that magic and mischief I saw when I met her – so familiar, and no wonder. I had seen those same eyes twenty-five years earlier in Miss Edna. I knew I recognized Miss Margaret the moment I met her, for she was the woman I saw at Miss Edna's funeral that had those magical family eyes.

"Thank you for inspiring me," I whispered softly into Miss Margaret's ear. And then I smiled as joyful tears glistened in my eyes.

Brown-eyed Girls

Craig Pfisterer

Woe be you brown-eyed girls,
You get only flowers and pearls
Because these lovely seeing two
Have a most peculiar hue.

Don't get me wrong on this matter,
It's just hard for one to flatter
One with eyes of beautiful brown
Since describing them makes us frown.

The lucky girls, eyes blue or green
Are sapphires and emeralds, such that gleam,
Eyes like an endless sea
Or a grassy meadow scene.

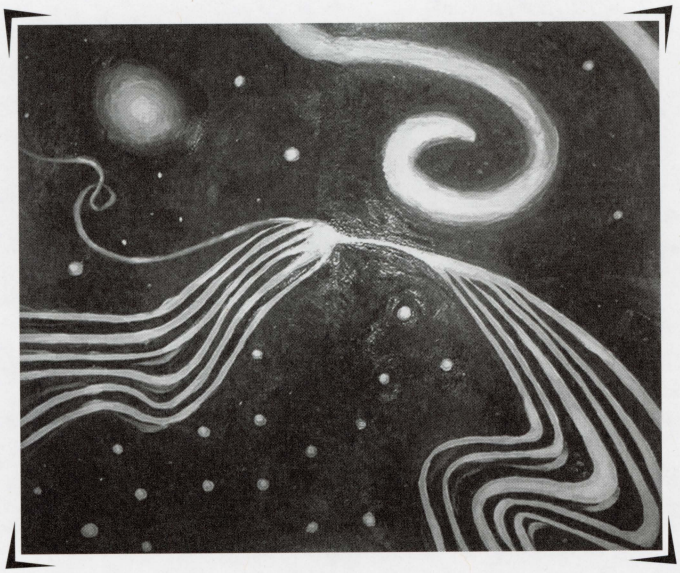
But what about you brown-eyed girls,
Hair straight or crimped with curls?
The choices are stretched thin,
Cow brown, doe eyed, pudding skin?

Expressive eyes, oh so bright,
I love to hold you close and tight,
However the words escape my mind
Those eyes of yours make me blind.

No, I don't mean literally,
I look at you, perfect I see,
But help me with this plight;
I'll try with all my might.

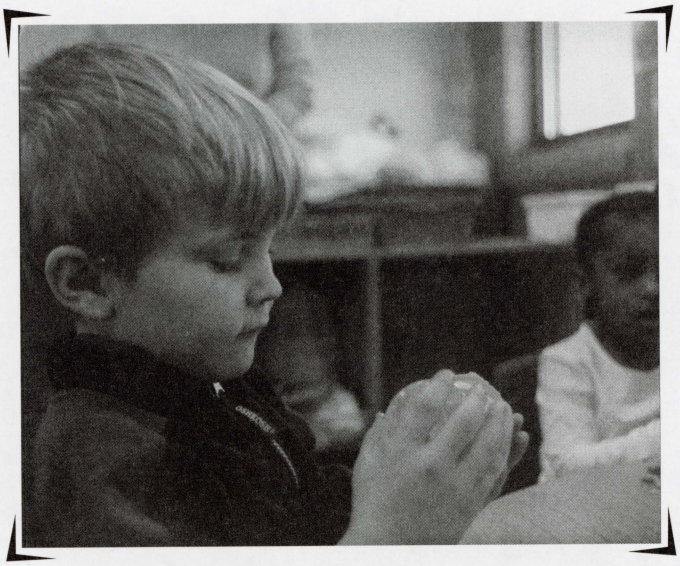
Woe be the poor man
A brown-eyed girl fan;
Those eyes of that hue
Leave the mind black and blue.

Taurean Washington



Cayt Baynard

Stacey Strickland



Cassandra Irby

Death

BJV

In its arms
We sleep at last,
The gentle rhythm
Of its breath
Lulls and calms
And pacifies
The pulsing in the breast.

Fad Diets: The Truth Behind the Miracle

Heather Martin

"It's a miracle! Lose weight quickly and easily! No exercise required!" What is it about this title that instantly grabs your attention? Is it the promise of quick, easy weight loss? For the 61% of Americans who are currently overweight, this type of guarantee brings them the hope they desperately crave. A month ago, I was one of these people…

he red string bikini that hung from my closet door seemed to be laughing at me. But what could I do? Winter was over and my joyful days of sitting on the comfortable leather sofa and snuggling with my warm feather-down comforter were over. No longer could I hide the rolls of fat I had accumulated as I spent the winter stuffing my face with pizza and holiday cookies. It was time to do something drastic.

I decided that fad dieting was the perfect way to lose my extra pounds. I had read dozens of magazine articles and heard stories from friends who insisted that fad diets would help me. My best friend assured me that I would lose weight very quickly. I wanted to know for myself. In one month I would try three different fad diets: The Cabbage Soup Diet, The Pritikin Diet, and The Grapefruit Diet. I would spend a week on each diet and record my results. It was time to find the truth behind the miracle.

Diet #1: The Cabbage Soup Diet.

I began my quest with The Cabbage Soup Diet. I made my grocery list, which consisted of all the ingredients for a gargantuan vat of cabbage soup. I would spend seven days straight eating all of the cabbage soup that my heart desired, plus a bizarre and very restricted selection of fruits and vegetables. No bread allowed!

My first day of cabbage soup wasn't as horrifying as I had imagined. The cabbage soup was actually quite filling and tasty. It wasn't until that night that I met my doom. I spent eight hours in my bed tossing and turning. In the silence of the night all I could hear my vacant stomach roaring and growling. I wondered if the cabbage soup had spawned into a monster. But the terrible night's sleep didn't stop me from waking up with excitement. I couldn't wait to weigh myself. I rushed to the bathroom and jumped on the scale. I had lost two pounds in one day and I was thrilled.

After three days on The Cabbage Soup Diet my stomach had finally stopped snarling. But on day four the cabbage soup was began to make me sick. The smell, the taste, and even the sight of it made me nauseous. I almost vomited on day seven as I forced spoonfuls of squishy cabbage down my tightened throat.

When my seven days of cabbage misery were over, I went to the scale. I had lost four pounds in one week, but I still felt like someone had injected poison into my stomach. I grabbed the leftover cabbage soup and eagerly tossed it into the yard. I would never eat cabbage soup again.

Diet #2: The Pritikin Diet

After a three-day break of eating my normal foods, it was time to start over with a new fad diet, The Pritikin Diet. I hoped that this one would be better, because it was a bit less restrictive. I was allowed to eat carbohydrate-rich foods if they were natural, whole, and unprocessed. The goal was to keep an average caloric density of each meal below 400 calories, and eat natural foods with a large volume of fiber and water, which would fill up my stomach.

On the first day of The Pritikin Diet I made another trip to the grocery store. I filled my cart with suggested foods such as brown rice, oatmeal, and vegetables. When I paid, I was shocked to find that one week of food cost me $130. I slowly opened my wallet and reluctantly handed the cashier every dollar that I had. "This diet better be worth it," I thought to myself.

The next few days were just plain gross. Who would have thought that eating all natural oatmeal and brown rice would be so disgusting? Everything that I ate was bland and tasteless. I would have gnawed someone's arm off for a bite of Ben and Jerry's ice cream. At night I slept much better than during the Cabbage Soup Diet, but I still wished that I had my $130 back so that I could buy some real food.

After seven days of ingesting whole grains and vegetables with no flavor, my Pritikin Diet had finally ended. I weighed myself one final time: I had lost a total of two pounds, which didn't seem to be nearly enough for a week of inconvenience and agony. I tried to recover by taking another three-day break before the final fad diet.

Diet #3: The Grapefruit Diet

It was time to finish out my month of fad dieting. This diet suggested that I eat grapefruit everyday to start the "burning" process. The Grapefruit Diet provided a list of foods that I could and could not eat and a specific meal plan. After another expensive trip to the grocery store, I was ready to begin my week of grapefruit torture.

The Grapefruit Diet was very similar to the first two. My foods were restricted, it was inconvenient, and the meals were disgusting. I felt moody and irritable from lack of sleep and my body felt weak and restless from the lack of calories. By day seven I was drooling at the sight of bread and I had had enough of fad dieting, so I weighed myself one final time in hopes that I would be skinny enough to slide into my red bikini. When I looked down at the cold metal scale, I saw that I had only lost one measly pound.

After all three of my fad diets were over, I spent a week eating my usual foods and trying to regain my strength. I decided to get back on the scale and see if the total seven pounds that I had lost were still gone. I had gained back every single pound that I had lost, plus one extra pound. I was devastated. A month of torturous fad diets had done nothing for me. I had discovered the disappointing truth behind the miracle.

The Hand of a Hero

Rachel Pardew

Everett Howard Bryant was a man who lived through the Great Depression with little food and nine siblings to share with. His hands were mangled in farm machinery as a boy, and because of this was turned down when he volunteered his life to serve in World War II. He fathered three children, one of which was a wayward son. He worked tirelessly to provide for his family, determined that his children never suffer as he did. He overcame lymphoma when the doctors told him he only had six months to live. He was born with only one kidney, and eventually died of kidney failure. But more important than all of this, he was my Poppop.

Until I was thirteen, my grandparents lived in a small, quiet Virginia town. They owned 52 acres of land, with several acres cleared off for Poppop's garden. He grew everything: potatoes, corn, green beans, cucumbers, squash, tomatoes, carrots, lettuce, cantaloupe, and watermelon. They had grape, blueberry, and blackberry vines, and apple and peach trees. All the food we ate was fresh, sweet, and delicious.

The garden was in a field several minutes from the house. Every day, Poppop would get on his tractor and ride through the woods on the overgrown path to his garden. I loved to ride to the garden with Poppop. Even when I was too young to drive, Poppop would let me "drive" by holding the steering wheel as his strong, steady hands guided the tractor down the bumpy path. When I got older, and there wasn't much room on the tractor seat, Poppop would still let me sit with him and drive to the garden. Sometimes, he would walk beside the tractor as I drove.

Poppop had been a hunter, so he always had two or three rifles sitting right beside the door with socks over the barrels. I only saw him use a rifle once. I had been playing outside near the greenhouse. As I ran around the greenhouse, I looked down, and practically stepped on a black snake. I froze. As the snake began to slither away, I ran towards the house screaming. My grandparents rushed outside to see what was wrong.

"There was a snake! I almost stepped on it; I was just playing and then there it was," I cried, pointing wildly at the greenhouse.

"Rachel, can you show me where you saw the snake?" Poppop asked quietly.

We walked over to the greenhouse. I gestured to a pile of machinery that Poppop had covered over with a blue tarp. Slowly, he pulled the cover back. Startled, the snake slithered towards the woods.

"Stand back, Rachel," he said, rather firmly. Poppop unlocked the safety from his rifle, steadied it on his shoulder and pulled the trigger. He shot the head right off the snake. The body kept moving for a few seconds, but then all was still.

"Go back inside. I think Grandma has lunch ready," Poppop said. I ran back inside as quickly as I could. I am not sure what Poppop did with the snake after I went inside, but then again, it didn't really matter. The snake was dead, along with my fears

I am the youngest grandchild in our family. Because of the age gap between my Mom and her brothers, there is a large age gap between the grandchildren. I am the baby, and I was my Poppop's baby. I'm not sure if Poppop would ever have admitted this, but I was his favorite. I remember, when he aged and weakened, and could no longer ride down to the garden on his tractor, I would just sit next to him, holding his hand and watching TV. I would also read from the Bible or from a book that I had brought from home. He would always comment on what a fast reader I was. I could hear the pride in his voice as he said this. As a child, Poppop had to quit school to help his family on their farm. He only made it to third grade, so his reading ability did not match mine. When his failing kidney tired him out, and the dialysis weakened him, I would still sit next to him, holding his hand, even when he fell asleep.

By the time I was thirteen, my grandparents were forced to move to Maryland to be near us because Poppop's health was failing. We found an apartment for them which was only five minutes from our house. Everything changed. Poppop seemed bound to the apartment because he no longer had 52 acres of land to roam. After a year in the apartment, my grandparents moved to an assisted living facility in Pennsylvania. Every Saturday that I could, I went with my Mom to visit them. I would sit and hold Poppop's hand as we all talked about things that were happening in our family.

One evening, we received a telephone call from the assisted living facility. Poppop had been rushed to the hospital because he had stopped breathing. My Mom and I raced to the car and drove to York Hospital. When we arrived at the emergency department, we were lead to a grieving room where the rest of our family sat. My Uncle and Aunt, my cousins, and my Grandma were all there, crying. Poppop had slipped away. After my Dad arrived, we were led to the room where Poppop's body was laid. My Grandma kissed him as tears dripped off her face. I was tempted to slip my hand into his, but I couldn't. I realized why later that night. I could have held his hand, but he wouldn't have held back.

It Always Ends

Krystal Cerniglia

I'll never forget that day; it was the day we let our true emotions show. We put all logic and loyalty aside and took a chance. We met in the church parking lot at six thirty that morning. All of us rolled out of our parents' cars half asleep and yawning. The charter bus was silver with a crimson red stripe. I waved goodbye to my parents from the bus' tinted window and reclined in the seat to try and catch up on some much needed sleep. But you wouldn't allow me to get any beauty rest, and continued to tap me on the head until I acknowledged your presence.

You were always trying to get my attention. I encountered many wet-willies, side pokes, and pulled hair when I was with you, so you can imagine my excitement at being stuck in front of you for five hours on a bus. Luckily, one of the chaperones placed "Remember the Titans" into the bus' VCR, taking your interest off me. You had always been the all-American boy stereotype. You were tall with defined muscles that were perfectly shaped, but not bulky. You were the brown-haired blue-eyed boy-next-door; the quarterback of the high school football team, whom everyone loved. But most importantly, you were my best friend.

I finally fell asleep on the bus and when I awoke, we were in Pennsylvania. The sky had opened and snowflakes swirled around the bus. I stepped off the bus and took in the surroundings; everything was covered with a blanket of fresh snow.

You stopped by my cabin after you finished unpacking, and we headed off to the mountain. We both looked ridiculous due to our numerous clothing layers, and I asked you to zipper my jacket since my mittens weren't cooperating. Finally, after climbing what seemed to be Mt. Everest, we arrived at the ski lifts. We clipped our boards onto our shoes and got in line. The lift seated four, so we got on with two other friends and made fun of all the people that were crashing from our seat in the sky. When it came time to descend the lift, our boards got tangled, and you and I wound up face first in the snow. Of course, you tried to blame the incident on me and threw a snowball in my face. The snow ran down my neck and melted onto a few of my top layers. We began to carve down the mountain with the wind blowing against us. Some little kid cut you off and you wound up crashing. I decided to spray you with snow to get you back for the snowball, and that is pretty much how the rest of the day continued. We threw snow at each other, made sly remarks, and made every trip down the mountain a competition for first place.

After mastering the intermediate slopes, we decided to give the black diamond a try. This ski lift was only meant for two, so we sat next to each other on the way up. You had asked how my relationship was, and I replied honestly that it was having trouble. I had heard that my boyfriend cheated on me, and when I confronted him, he denied it. Then you told me that he probably did cheat. I didn't reply. I didn't know how to respond to your comment. I was trapped levitating in the sky and all I wanted to do was scream. You were supposed to make me feel better, not worse about myself.

The slope was a lot steeper than I had imagined, and there was one part that plummeted straight down. I got scared and stopped before I reached it. You told me that it would be all right; all I had to do was follow you. You even teased about holding my hand to assist me. We slowly began sliding down and I knew there was no turning back. I was scared, but I trusted you to do what was best. Just when it looked like we were going to make it, we hit a sleek ice patch and skidded out of control. I landed on top of you and quickly apologized.

We sat there for a second and the snow began to gently fall. I stuck my tongue out to try and catch a tasteless flurry and noticed you staring at me. I asked you what was wrong, and you replied nothing but kept staring. Then it happened; you leaned in and kissed me. You whispered, "I know I shouldn't, but I can't help myself." I took off my mittens and pulled your face closer, feeling the definition of your jaw under my clammy fingers. Our mouths felt like an inferno in comparison to the weather. Infidelity swirled all around us, masked by the snowflakes. We sat there kissing until our clothes became soaked from the wet snow. You smiled and helped me up, exclaiming, "first to the end wins!" It was always a game with you.

That kiss was three years ago and it destroyed everything we had. There are so many things that I want to say to you, that I want to scream, that I want to cry, that I want to laugh about, but it has been too long since I've seen you and even longer since we've talked. We had been friends since we were eleven, since that day in band class, when you "accidentally" hit me with your trombone. We knew each other's darkest secrets, thoughts, and dreams. But now all I know about you is the memories we once shared.

I'm haunted by your memory and, at times, I am convinced I hate you. The person you have become disgusts me, because I barely know him. There have been several times when we have tried to make an amends, to place the past behind us and start over again; but it never worked. Our relationship didn't last long, and it ended badly. Perhaps the reason we can't be friends is because there is still a snowflake's size of passion between us. There are times when I wish that kiss had never happened, but isn't that the way it always ends?

Black Abyss

Julie Presley

Alone again.
Pushed to the side.
Bobbing along
In a vast blue sea.

Here again.
So numb and unfeeling.
Trying to
Find my way back home.

Thrown again,
Against this cold wall,
Bleeding and
Pleading with my attacker.

Fighting again,
With these harrowing fears,
Wondering if
It has all been wasted.

Peering again,
Into your hollow soul,
I alone
Can see your hidden self.

Rejected again,
These emotions are mounting,
But something
Holds back these fiery tears.

Found again,
The scared child within.
You expose
All I've tried to forget.

Listening again,
I hear you utter
All things
That haunt your very soul.

Together again.
The hate and fear,
Two things
That reside in these eyes.
Flowing again
Like a tumultuous rain,
The realization
That it's all crashing down.

Standing again
Back to the wind,
Always resisting
The evils in this world.

Alone again
But it's quite right.
The companion
Of loneliness never leaves you.

Hattie Hale

The Artist's Palette

Ashley Judy

Bouncing playfully from tree to tree, leaf to leaf, and face to face, I watched as the golden rays of the sun encased all the world in a sense of wonder; endless shades of reds, oranges, yellows, greens, blues, indigos, and violets, the visible spectrum of light, candy to the eyes, ROY-G-BIV to many, electromagnetic radiation to scientists, and simply beauty to artists, stretched out before me. The world appeared before my eyes as a work of art of which the artist was uncertain, a palette of color and life.

As though playfully dancing to earth, the gentle leaves of orange and yellow swayed through the air, finally coming to rest upon the ground. A rebel of sorts, still with a dab of green, landed comfortably in my lap as I unsuspectingly glanced about the park. My bench sat in a perfect spot. The path lay just ahead and the horizon, speckled in trees of all shapes and sizes, remained as far as the eye could see. None could escape the inevitability of their cycle of change: barren to bud, bud to leaves of green, leaves of green to flowers of pink, white, and red, leaves and flowers to leaves of orange and yellow, returning finally to a barren state once more.

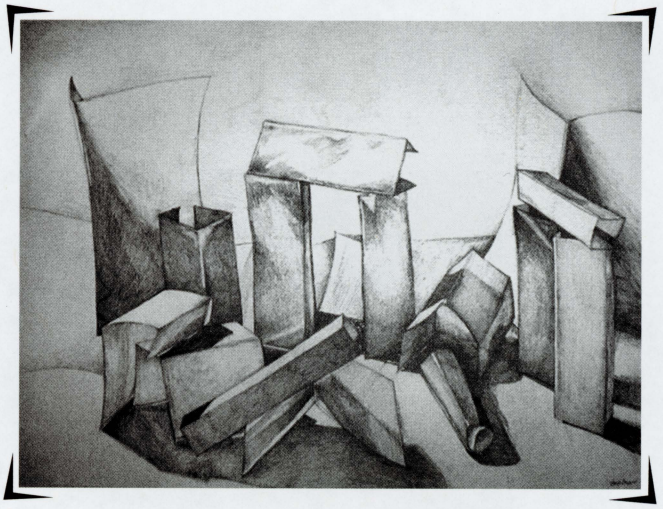
As I sat, twirling the fallen leaf between my fingers, I wondered why. Why was *this* leaf so different from all the rest and for that matter, why were the rest all the same? I imagined a sea of silver or black or pink leaves and wondered why such things did not exist. What was the determining factor in the human perception of color, in all things really, not just leaves alone? The scientific answer is pigment.

The human eye can see only a small portion of light, which gives all things color by being either reflected, transmitted, or absorbed by pigment. The leaf is green, yellow, and orange simply because it is absorbing those wavelengths of visible light that are green, yellow, and orange. In essence, the ROY of ROY-G-BIV.

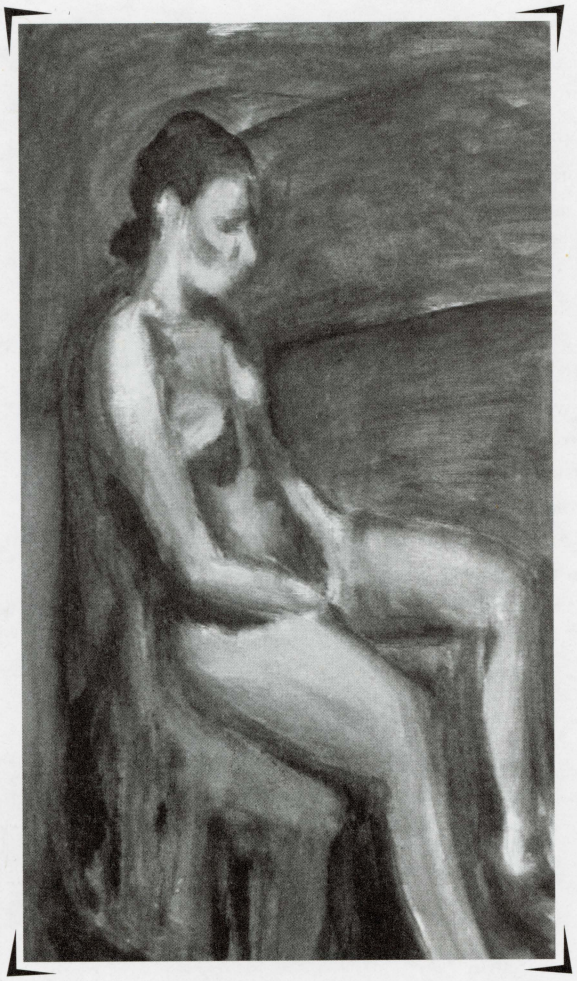
I studied the stem of the leaf which was still a dull green, the sign of a once healthy life; the outermost layer (the blade) was a collage of orange and yellow, red dots situated randomly about, and the once voluptuous vein seemed to dissipate before my very eyes. It was dying in my hands and I could do no more than acknowledge its beauty. That which had sustained life was returning to the earth from whence it came, not fearing its own mortality, but fulfilled with the knowledge that someday, it would again be reborn. Despite all my mind's philosophical and existential ramblings, I was still faced with yet another plaguing question: how could this one thing, this leaf, be composed of so many colors? The scientific answer is chemicals.

Chemicals within the pigment of the blade determined the light that was absorbed by it, and thus its color. The season was changing and so was the leaf in its chemical makeup. Yet the question as to why certain chemicals are present in certain matter is unanswerable. The artist alone is the only one who can answer that question.

Quietly I raised myself, and as I stood in amazement at the rain of leaves falling gracefully to the earth, I gently placed my friend upon the bench where I had been sitting and headed towards the path that lead home.



Cayt Baynard



Stacey Strickland

The Frog

Bill Taylor

There was a strange color to the night clouds. Not the usual black or even blue, but more of a bright, pinkish orange. The air was mild, walking the line between warm and cold, just enough not to bother any passersby should a breeze start to blow.

And this was one of the lowliest tasks Maciste had ever been asked to undertake. The people of the village had called upon him to hunt down a frog – not an ordinary frog, but a frog the size of a man, and twice as strong. But Maciste was no ordinary man, so when the people of the village came to know of his massive strength, they turned to him for help.

"A frog, you say?" he said incredulously. "What trouble can one frog be to so many people?"

"Oh Maciste," the village elder said, "this is not an ordinary frog. It is like a goblin, the size of a man, only stronger and more dangerous. It has been sneaking into our town in the night, stealing our food, killing our livestock, and attacking us."

"How strong can this frog be?" Maciste asked.

"Stronger than us," was Curtwood's reply. "We fought with it one night, and it threw us off so easily, we may as well have been twigs being thrown at a wall. We've tried to track it, but without much success. But we think it lives near the river, where the water flows freely."

"There's something else," said a middle aged woman among the villagers, a grim look in her brown eyes. "The frog took my daughter."

"When did this happen?"

"Two nights ago," replied the woman in a hollow, defeated voice. "We haven't been able to find her. I can only assume the worst."

It didn't take much after that for the people of the village to persuade Maciste to go after the frog for them. He'd always had a soft heart and, even when faced with a task that struck him as absurd, he simply couldn't refuse to help those who asked it of him.

As he had been instructed by the villagers, Maciste followed the river. He had already checked the lake and found nothing to suggest a giant man-frog lived there, though admittedly he didn't know what would indicate the presence of such a beast.

The river was so loud that it drowned out much of the other sounds within the forest, which caused Maciste to wonder if that was an indicator of the frog living there. Who

Hattie Hale

would have heard a man-frog creeping along the riverside with all the noise of the rushing water?

He spent much of the night just following the river, but to no avail. He would stop from time to time to mark off a tree so that he would have a guide back to the village, which had served him well in the past, but so far Maciste felt as though he'd been sent out on a wild goose chase.

And then he heard it. A loud, unmistakable croak not unlike a frog, only amplified to the range of a human-sized entity.

Peering around a tree, Maciste set his first sights on the frog, which was about the size of a man, standing erect like a man and carrying itself like a man while sporting the unmistakable green coloring and hide of a frog.

The frog crouched down in front of a tree, before the form of a girl, or rather a young woman, who possessed bright red hair that was easily seen even at night. The frog was stared at her as though she was most beautiful, while she appeared to be unconscious, for she did not stir or move as the frog reached out to her, touching her wrist. The frog ran its webbed hand up her arm, to her shoulder, then to her neck, and up along her jawbone. From there, the frog placed its hand on her chest, moving it down to her stomach, then feeling along her hip, and then down to caress her leg.

At this, Maciste charged forward, latching his large hand around the frog's wrist, pulling him about and hurling him into the river. Maciste then dropped down to his knee to examine the girl. She was in fact unconscious, the molesting of the frog having gone unnoticed by her; indeed, she seemed to be in a most peaceful sleep.

Just as Maciste was about to pick her up, he felt something big and wet jump onto him from behind – the frog. Maciste rose to his feet, stomped away from the sleeping redhead, grabbed his amphibian assailant and threw him forward, almost sending him into a tree. The frog quickly rolled to his feet and lunged again at Maciste, but Maciste struck him across the face with the back of his right fist, knocking him down.

Maciste tried to stomp the frog with his foot, but he rolled away, took a handful of dead leaves into its webbed hands and threw them into Maciste's face. The frog then got to his feet and began slamming his wet fists into Maciste's face and chest. However, the strength that had allowed the frog man to overpower the villagers did not begin to compare to Maciste's, and the blows merely bounced off ineffectually. Maciste grabbed the frog by its left wrist, and then slammed his own fist into the frog's stomach, making the frog to crumple into himself.

For a moment, the two combatants did nothing but stand there, Maciste holding the frog by the wrist as the frog clutched at its stomach in pain. And then, the frog began to make a strange noise that Maciste could not initially identify. Before long, however, he realized that the frog was crying. But crying for what?

Maciste let go of the frog, and the frog fell to the ground completely, curling up into a ball on its side. As he turned away to collect the girl, the frog started crawling alongside him, still crying and moaning. As Maciste knelt down to pick up the girl, the frog man reached out to him, with a croak that sounded like a plea. Maciste disregarded the frog's gesture, but he chose not to inflict any more harm upon the frog.

The next morning Maciste returned the girl to the village, and stayed for a few days at the request of the villagers, who were unsure of the frog man's future actions. When the frog man did not return, Maciste continued on his way.

Stacey Strickland

Saturday Mornings at Horn & Horn

Harry B. Turner

Early each Saturday morning Dad fingered through the week's worth of pocket change he'd accumulated on his bureau. A few coins that interested him (Liberty dimes, half dollars, buffalo nickels, Indian head pennies) he'd deposit into one of the cobalt-blue glass Noxzema jars he always saved for collecting things. He'd load the balance into his pants pockets and gather a couple of kids to accompany him downtown for breakfast.

These trips were meant to make Saturday mornings less stressful for Mom, who always had a child in diapers, another on the way, and no way to keep the other four or five out of trouble. It was a given that I'd be one of the two going downtown with Dad. I had a childhood history of imaginative misadventures that earned me the nickname "Horrible Harry" (shortened to just plain "Horrible" later in boyhood). My daring exploits too often ended tragically with firemen dousing a flaming bedroom or motorists honking at the family's dog, abandoned in the driver's seat after I'd drifted the station wagon down the driveway and blocked Bellemore Road.

The three of us would ride downtown from Mt. Washington on the "Ruxton Rocket," the with-it name of an ancient commuter train. We'd disembark at Centre Street, the end of the line near the Sunpapers building, and then hike down Guilford Avenue to "The Block" for breakfast at Horn and Horn on Baltimore Street.

What would've otherwise been a tedious seven block trek was made a competitive race by Dad. Though there was none but us on Guilford at 7:30 Saturday morning, there was a lot of evidence of great activity the previous evening. Dad would assign one kid the west sidewalk, the other the east, and we'd hurry down Guilford loudly and enthusiastically counting out the numbers of empty, discarded bottles we found on our respective sidewalks. The closer we got to the Block, the more tiny glass liquor bottles we counted.

On Saturday mornings, Horn and Horn, with its marble counter and small tables, echoed with the hard Baltimorese of a friendly mixture of dancers, bouncers, hangovers, and leftovers recovering in the morning after the Friday night before. All the regulars and waitresses were familiar with Dad's Saturday morning breakfast routine.

Each kid knew what the other wished for breakfast—hotcakes and French toast! Each realized, though, that wish fulfillment depended on how much pocket change Dad had brought home that week. We didn't need menus to decide what we wanted—we needed them to determine what was "within budget."

Dad always cleared the center of the table of its salt and pepper shakers and sugar dispenser, and then noisily unloaded that week's coinage. The younger child would slowly and loudly count up our wealth. The older employed superior arithmetical skill to confirm or correct the count, and then negotiations commenced.

What could the three of us order, divvy up, or share that would come within budget and could still be called "breakfast?" In weeks when quarters were scarce, we could always count on Dad to be dramatically self-denying: "Oh well, I suppose I'll just have a scrambled egg and toast this week . . . and scrapple-instead-of-bacon." Depending on the budget, my sibling and I might be able to split orders of French toast and hotcakes. At worst we'd flip one of those precious coins to see who'd have hotcakes and who'd have to settle for cream of wheat and an egg. In good weeks, we'd luxuriate in orange juice in the tiniest tumblers we'd ever seen. In especially bad weeks, Dad would offer to share his scrapple, knowing neither of us would accept no matter how hungry.

Whatever the budget, we'd have great fun running the numbers and arguing over all possible and impossible menu combinations. So absorbed were we in making calculations that we never noticed the entertainment we provided the rest of Horn and Horn's clientele . . . until our last Saturday there.

Our breakfast budget excursions came to an end one morning in 1960 when two concerned priests finished their breakfast and stopped by our table on the way out to commend Dad on his fine family. While smiling at us and taking comfort in finding such joy amid such poverty, each of the priests laid a dollar bill down on the table in front of my father, who'd "obviously" been panhandling along Baltimore Street in order to feed his family a meagre meal.

It was an extraordinary scene. It was one of Dad's strict rules that we were never to look embarrassed because of our father. We didn't. It was Dad's face that turned red. He'd broken his own rule—he was displaying a painfully embarrassed Dad we'd never seen. The more he protested Christian charity with stupefied blurts like "but it's just a game" and "y'see . . . our weekend treat," the more waifishly us kids beamed at the priests whose money from heaven conjured images of unheard of donuts and danishes.

Dad wouldn't take the two dollars; the priests wouldn't take 'em back; we didn't get donuts; but some waitress at Horn and Horn wore a snaggle-toothed grin over an extraordinary tip.

Never again would we practice budgeting over breakfast. Saturday mornings thereafter, Dad, two of his kids, and his billfold patronized Bickford's on Holliday Street.

Chase Knows the Song

Andy Beres

Elizabeth groaned in frustration as her computer froze again. This day just got worse and worse. Chase sat with his back against her chair, scribbling something on a notepad that was almost assuredly of little consequence. Elizabeth hadn't bothered him with the horrors of her day yet, though she seldom did without some prodding anyway. He appeared deep in thought when she turned to observe him, but he had that look of his plastered across his face – the one where she couldn't tell if he was amused or about to have a nervous breakdown.

"Say, honey, I was thinking..." he said suddenly. "If the Colonel can't cut it and New Orleans style has lost its thrill, so Wendy's fried chicken is the real deal... isn't there some concern from the Wendy's franchise that their chicken will also lose its thrill?"

Elizabeth managed a half-smile. "Write them a letter, sweetie."

It was a rare day when one of his idiotic ramblings didn't induce the easy grin he fell in love with. He twisted around to look at her and, dissatisfied with her expression, pushed himself onto his knees.

"What's the matter?"

"I had a really, really bad day."

Chase nodded mutely and stood. "Tell me about it."

"I was up all night writing that paper... and I just couldn't think. There was one point where I thought seriously about cut and pasting it from the internet."

"Well, if it was from a web browser, the likelihood is that you'd be copy and pasting, not cut... continue, dear."

She shut her eyes and smiled at the awkward manner that so endeared him to her, as Chase came around back of her to rub her neck. "I finally got to sleep around five. Then I slept through my alarm and didn't make it to my nine. I woke up about five of ten and..."

Elizabeth's face contorted a bit at Chase's efforts to relieve her tension. She took hold of one of his hands, removing it from her neck. He looked a bit downtrodden at the dismissal. "I'm sorry. I'm not very good at that, am I?"

"No, it's not that... it's...no, you're not." She cringed inwardly and continued quickly. "I woke up at five of ten and I was so tired, I just grabbed my books and went. It wasn't until I was walking into the room that I realized... I was in my pajamas."

"Which ones?" he asked, a jealous edge in his voice.

"The Bear ones."

"The Bears ones?!" he exclaimed. "You know damn well those are too cute to share with the general public."

"Trust me, nobody thought it was cute..." she said certainly. "Unless laughter and the coldest stare I've seen this year from Dr. Smits constitutes 'cute.'"

Chase latched on to the latter part of her statement. "He gave you a cold stare? What kind of cold stare? Was it cold like, 'I'm having a bad day,' or cold like, 'You make me sick?"

"Definitely the second one," she replied, inspiring a reaction that never failed to amuse her.

"You want me to kick his ass? 'Cause I'll go down there and I'll look him in the face and I'll be like, 'Hey, pal, here comes the reckoning.'"

"No, thank you, dear."

"I could do it... I could kick some major ass."

"I know you could, sweetie."

There was a pause, as the two exchanged an amicable silence, each content with the other's fond gaze. Chase spoke tentatively. "Elizabeth? That was a lie. I would be the major ass being kicked in that scenario."

She laughed. It wasn't just any laugh, though. It was the one the drifted up out of her belly and spread through her chest like the wind carrying fire in a drought. She leaned in and Chase could smell the familiar scent of strawberry shampoo and Starbucks coffee that was so very her.

He ran a hand through her hair and left it to rest on the back of her head. She lay her palm on his cheek in kind and stroked the dry skin there with her thumb. He let out a contented breath and she could smell the residue of half a dozen Tic-Tacs. She felt like she was in an orange grove sometimes.

Chase pressed his lips against her forehead. "I love you."

* * *

Elizabeth gathered her shoes, as Chase retrieved his wallet and keys from the floor beside her bed. "You think it's weird we don't have a song yet?" he asked.

"Um, I hadn't really thought about it. Why?"

"I donno. Most people just seem to have one. Like, the other day, I was in the mall and they start playing this song and this guy says to the woman he's with, 'Hey, it's our song,' and it made me feel all ABC Family."

"Well, how do you get a song? Is there supposed to be some amazing moment where we just know it's our song? 'Cause that could take a while."

He furrowed his brow. "You're right. Maybe we should just pick one."

"Can we do that?"

"Well, I doubt the FCC has jurisdiction over this sort of thing."

Elizabeth stood and grabbed her jacket. "Okay, we'll pick one."

Chase knelt down beside her and tied one of her shoes while she tied the other. Then he propped open the door with his foot and waited for her, but she stopped halfway there.

"Chase? Aren't you forgetting something?"

"I don't believe so."

Not this again. Elizabeth sauntered over to the coat rack and took his jacket, then joined him at the door. "Your jacket. And roll your sleeves down too. What is this, the Polar Bear Club?"

Chase might have laughed, but he thought he owed it to himself to feel emasculated. "Can you promise me something? Can we pretend I'm a domineering man's man in regards to our relationship when we're in front of the guys?"

She smirked and linked their arms at the elbow. "You are, dear."

They stepped out into the hallway of the dormitory and Elizabeth locked the door behind them.

"I told Trip and Sarah we'd come by when we were going to eat," she said as they walked towards the staircase at the end of the corridor.

"Okay. Hey, how about 'Send in the Clowns' for our song?"

"That's about a loveless marriage that finally breaks up, sweetie," she explained. "What about that Garth Brooks song, 'When You Come Back' or something?"

Chase held the door for her as they entered the stairwell. "He wrote that right after he cheated on his wife. What about the theme from 'Full House?'"

"If you're not going to take this seriously..."

He sang. "What ever happened to predictability... the milkman, the paperboy, and evening TV..."

* * *

Elizabeth eyed she and Chase's joined hands, making sure to insert an "uh-huh" when Sarah paused for a breath in her endless monologue. His hands were almost as soft as hers, a fact he'd once attributed to years of avoiding manual labor. It was a beautiful contrast, his white skin twined with her brown. She often found herself wondering what their children would look like, whose pallor they would most closely mimic, whose features they would lease as their own.

Hattie Hale

"... Elizabeth?"

Sarah's query broke her from her reverie and she turned to face her.

"Sorry, what?"

"I'm gonna go freshen up. You coming?"

The ladies departed for the restroom, leaving Trip and Chase alone with their half-empty plates and lacking appetites. They looked at one another with dueling "can you believe those women?" expressions to satisfy the day's testosterone quota. A few moments passed before Trip broke the silence.

"You seen that new Toys'R'Us commercial?"

"Which one?"

"The one about the amazing holiday video game savings."

"Oh, right. Yeah."

"Did you notice the talking Giraffe? His name's Jeffrey. See, though, it's not 'Jeffrey' with a J... it's 'Geoffrey' with a G. Isn't that a little pretentious? Why does he need to use a G? He's shilling video games to children. He's practically a carny!"

Chase leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. "Trip, what's on your mind? Whenever you go off on one of these tangents, it usually means there's something you wanna say, so what's up?"

Trip took his elbows off the table and began to wring his hands anxiously. Chase watched his comrade's change in posture and demeanor and unconsciously stiffened.

"Okay..." Trip began ungainly. "There's somethin' I've been tryin' to say ever since it happened, but it was just too damn hard to bring anything up."

Chase was silent. Trip took a breath. "I think you and Elizabeth are making a huge mistake."

It was funny how months of perpetual sleeplessness and crippling stress hadn't done him in, but this one sentence could. Chase seemed poised to deposit the half of the steak he had eaten right back onto his plate as Trip continued. "I know you don't want to hear that from me. I know you're not supposed to have to deal with me too, but you guys are two of my closest friends and I think you're going to regret this."

"Why?" Chase managed.

"Because there's not one thing in the world you guys have going for you," Trip replied with agonizing matter-of-factness. "You work part time and you're going to school. She doesn't work at all. She's Catholic, you're an atheist..."

Chase blinked something away. "Agnostic."

"She wants to travel the Earth and you want to stay here. She wants to move up the corporate ladder and you want to be a teacher. She wants to conquer the world and

you want to find a corner to put up a picket fence."

"Stop." Chase felt the world spin.

"Her parents hate you, but more than *that*, they don't even know you're engaged!" Trip practically shouted. "You're going to marry a girl whose parents hate you while they're shelling out thirty grand a year for her to go to school? You're out of your fucking mind, Chase!"

Chase stood very abruptly from the table and braced himself on its edge a moment, his dizziness and nausea matched in severity by the words that had induced them. Trip stood as well, but could only watch speechlessly as his friend shuffled towards the men's restroom.

Chase could hear very distantly the sound of a man telling a woman their song was playing. He swung his weight against the wooden door and it slammed open. The room was empty, and he stumbled into the first stall and dropped to his knees.

The floor didn't look like it had been mopped in ages and the knees of his pants would assuredly require extra attention when they went through the wash. The toilet itself was clean, but then, how clean did it need to be for this occasion? He only wanted to acquaint it with the remains of his dinner.

"Come on," he moaned between coughs. "Come on."

And then, as if someone greater than man had had a change of heart, Chase vomited. It was bits of his meal that came up at first, but that supply was short-lived, so he began to gag again seconds later. After a while, it passed, and he sank down onto his posterior next to the toilet, staring absently at the stall door.

In another time and mindset, he might have pondered whether or not Laura was really the one to call for a good time or why Joe seemed so angry with Marie, but he didn't see those pen marks right now. He shut his eyes and cried.

Several minutes went by and he silenced himself, wiping his eyes on his shirt and lifting himself off the ground. He stepped out of the stall and walked over to the sink. Turning the faucet on, he lowered his head next to the stream of water, and rinsed his mouth.

Chase looked at himself in the mirror; he looked pathetic, the incarnadine eyes anchoring his pale face staring back at him with unfortunate clarity. Trip's words weighed heavy on his mind, but they didn't have a monopoly on his thoughts. There were other things, dark things, locked away in some compartment guarded only by the sanity of that one tiny voice that dared to speak against the unspeakable.

But in that moment, when he sought most a charitable utterance, the voice was so loud that it rattled his head.

"Somebody loves me."

He scoured his pockets for his Tic-Tacs and, upon finding them, stuffed several into his mouth and headed for the door. When he stepped back out into the restaurant, Elizabeth was waiting.

"Are you okay?" she asked, laying a cool hand on his face.

"I'm fine," Chase mumbled. He forced a smile, even as he glanced across the restaurant at Trip, who looked away in guilt. "Let's go home."

* * *

Elizabeth listened to his heartbeat. It was something that often put her to sleep. Usually, she counted about seventy beats a minute, but it was more like ninety just then. She couldn't tell if he was awake and she didn't want to budge if he wasn't. He needed to sleep. But her curiosity eventually overtook her and she craned her neck around to look at her fiancé. He was still awake, staring off into some distance.

Leigh Morgan

"Chase?"

At the mention of his name, he turned and smiled at her and readjusted himself to lie facing her. He reached out a hand and smoothed back her hair.

"What were you thinking?" she asked.

Chase looked away, a faint grin on his face. "Well, I was thinking about the Grinch. Wouldn't the physical burden of saving that sleigh full of toys from the edge of the cliff have given him chronic back pain for the rest of his life? And then, when you consider the number of cardiologist visits that are in order when his heart grows two sizes too big for his chest cavity, you're talking about a lot of money, and a hermit living on the outskirts of Whoville probably has a pretty suspect HMO, so..."

He looked up. She was just staring at him. His grin faded. "What?"

"Chase, what's the matter?"

"Nothing. Everything's fine."

Elizabeth caught his hand and trapped it between both her own. She always had a cute trick when she wanted to get something out of him. There was always some adorable turn of phrase that could coax him into giving her her way. But there wasn't any cute trick to be used here and all she had to fall back on were three words he knew were real. "I love you."

"I know," he said. "I'd die for you so quick, by the time I thought about it, I'd have died again."

Elizabeth nodded. She knew he'd tell her everything now. She waited.

"Do you ever get scared of the future?"

"Sometimes."

"Do you ever wonder if I can really make you happy?"

"No."

"What if your parents stop paying for school?"

"Then I'll get a job and wait a year."

"Can we have a house in the suburbs with a picket fence?"

"Yes."

"Can we have 2.5 children?"

"Yes."

"What about your last name?"

"I'll take yours."

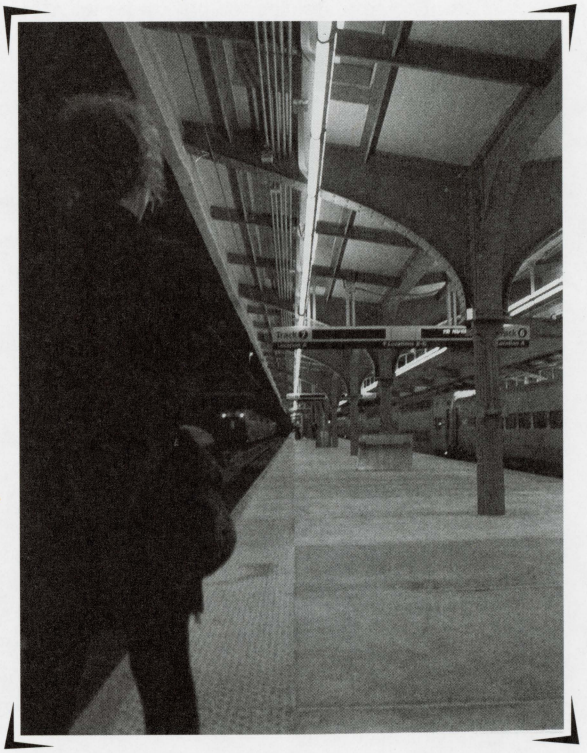
The questions stopped.

"Everything is so fucking hard, I can't stand it. There's a million things wrong with my life and there's a million things wrong with this world and I always used to wonder what the fuck it mattered what I did. I used to go home and go to bed without a reason to think it'd ever get any better. But now, there's a million things wrong with my life and a million things wrong with this world and then I look at you. And if you're the only thing about anything that's right, then that's good enough for me. You're the hope that breaths life into dreams."

Elizabeth leaned in and brushed his lips faintly with her own. When he drew back, he had that smile – the one where she couldn't tell if he was amused or about to have a nervous breakdown. "What?"

His smile broadened. "I know our song."

Grab your ticket and your suitcase
Thunder's rolling down the tracks
You don't know where you're goin'
But you know you won't be back
Darlin' if you're weary
Lay your head upon my chest
We'll take what we can carry
And we'll leave the rest
Big Wheels rolling through fields
Where sunlight streams
Meet me in a land of hope and dreams
—Bruce Springsteen



Josh Jarmin

One Moment in Time

Stacey Strickland

On a bittersweet evening,
At one moment in time,
When the nippy winds were stinging
With the sharpened scent of pine,
The harsh air of December
Was hanging on our breath,
The winter barely visible
On the Earth's distant crest.
Trees stood stiff and barren.
Frozen ponds laid still.
But somewhere life was growing,
Despite the biting chill.
A delicate tendril sprouted
On an ever-growing vine,
An intricate detail forming
A more perfect design.
For a moment winter rested,
For a moment all was well,
As a fragile blossom budded,
As born was Faith Noelle.

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